

THE STRANGE
ADVENTURE OF

ROGER
WILKINS

&
OTHER
STORIES

by

R. ANDOM



Illustrated by

Charles Gould

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THE STRANGE ADVENTURE

OF ROGER WILKINS.



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The Strange Adventure of Roger Wilkins

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

R. ANDOM.

AUTHOR OF "WE THREE AND TRODDLES".

ILLUSTRATED BY A. CARRUTHERS GOULD.

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TO MY WIFE

whose comfortable and encouraging appreciation has made me alive to the unsuspected advantages of having a critic on the hearth, so to speak, this work is dedicated.

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P R E F A C E.

UST before this work of mine was born, I had a dream. I dreamt that I fell out of bed and found myself in a police-station, of all places in the world. It was wonderfully vivid—a dirty, bare barrack, with policemen standing about in blue tunics and big feet, “just like real”, as the children would say.

And presently out from the cells behind there came a weird doleful moaning, like a strong man smitten with the toothache, interjected with lamentations plaintive and sorrowful.

“Alas, woe is me!” sobbed the voice. “My friends will desert me and my business is ruined. Miserable man that I am. Yah—ah—ah.”

“Go and stop that row, Jack,” said the inspector on duty briefly, and he turned and burrowed into his paper. But, nevertheless, the voice went on dismally complaining amidst sounds of rending garments and gruesome requests for sack-cloth and ashes.

And presently there arose from an adjoining cell a laugh so hearty and spontaneous that it overpowered the dismal one and compelled the policemen and myself to join in out of sympathy.

“Ah, ah, ah!” it pealed again and again and then died away in subdued chucklings.

"I say you, there in that cell, shut up," shouted the inspector. "It ain't no laughing matter."

"It is though," came back the voice. "It's killing, and I *am* shut up. That's the joke, and it's you who are in the 'sell.' Eh, eh! I say, Robert, you won't tell anybody, will you? but you've got the wrong man. Oh! it's such an overpowering spree; but I'm not Timmy Stevens at all, my name is Johnson."

Even as the man spoke the laughter sounded fainter and fainter in my ears, and I awoke to find that I *had* fallen out of bed.

I looked for arnica, and, in looking, the interpretation of my dream was made plain to me, and I resolved that I would thenceforth cultivate humour lest, peradventure, I should one day find myself in a cell and make lamentation, and tear my hair and garments, and say: "Alas, woe is me!" and forget that my name is not Timmy Stevens. Fortune generally contrives to arrest the wrong man; but, being a lady, she does not like to be laughed at, and I have noticed that the laughs usually go free where the douse and sorrowful trip and fall and hurt themselves badly.

R. A.

Leytonstone, March, 1895.

The Strange Adventure of Roger Wilkins.

Supposing I were you,
Supposing you were me,
Supposing each were somebody else,
How funny it would be!

SOMEBODY'S SUPPOSITIONS.

CHAPTER I.



ROGER WILKINS, like unto the famous John Gilpin, "was a citizen of credit and renown" — "a trained band captain" eke he was n't — "of famous London Town." To put the matter concisely, and in language plain and easy to be understood, he was a City merchant, being chief and only partner of the firm of Roger Wilkins and Co., exporters and importers, Tower-street, E.C. He was immensely wealthy, and, owing to the numerous companies and institutions in which his name figured, was a power in the land. His private life was passed in a comfortable and imposing residence at Sydenham. For the rest he was a widower with one child — a boy of twelve, whom he had packed off to a residential school in the country nearly two years ago.

The business of the firm was carried on by the cashier and general manager, Mr. George Willis, and two

junior clerks, in addition to the proprietor, who transacted a substantial amount of work himself, and Jimmy, the office-boy, who did everything for everybody with very little thanks, and not much more pay in return. Indeed, the life of Mr. Wilkins's office-boy was not one to be envied. Everybody seemed down on him, and Roger Wilkins himself set the example. While he was in the office Jimmy was perpetually kept in hot water over one thing and another, and he received notice of dismissal on an average about three times a week.

Neither the general dislike in which he was held, nor the threat of being turned off, moved Jimmy to any great extent. He was of a philosophic disposition, and the only feeling to which he was susceptible was one of envy. He envied the wealth and position of his master, and his sole idea of earthly bliss was to stand in the shoes of Roger Wilkins and make the office-boy "do things".

"If I was only 'im, Bill," he would say sometimes to a chum, "I would have a time, you can betcher life!"

To which his friend would reply with mild sarcasm: "Yes, but yer ain't 'im, Jimmy, and yer ain't likely to be im, Jimmy, and cause why? Cause yer ain't a gen'leman, and 'im is. Yo'r only a office-boy and 'll come to be a sangwich man, and 'll go in the work'us. Yar!"

A battle usually terminated these dialogues, and Jimmy would appear at the office in the morning with a couple of black eyes to bear witness to the dangers and disadvantages of possessing a soaring ambition. Never-

theless, Jimmy persisted in building his ethereal castles, and found a substantial comfort amidst his daily drudgery in doing so. They helped him wonderfully to bear the bullying of his superiors, and under their sustaining influence the diatribes of his master fell on him unheeded.

"If I were only in your place and you in mine," he would reflect, though not exactly in these words, "I would give you a lively time before I had done with you!"

These thoughts even Jimmy recognised to be beyond the widest bounds of possibility; but they amused him and comforted him, so he persisted in them.

James Roberts was a character study in himself. He was a sharp-featured, hungry-looking little lad of the genus cockney. Like many of this species, Jimmy was preternaturally sharp. He had been born and brought up in a school that tends to inculcate the very essence of sharpness, and after a twelve years' course had become as pointed as the proverbial needle. It was necessary to rise very early indeed to get the better of Jimmy, and none knew this better than Jimmy himself.

He had obtained his present position some three years back owing to a chance service to Mr. Wilkins, seeing in it a better prospect of advancement than his occupation of match and paper peddling was likely to give him—although it lacked the charm of the free and unfettered existence passed about the streets and railway arches. Jimmy had snatched at the offer when it was made, and had managed to satisfy the none-

too-easy requirements of his employer. He was quite content with his lot and wished for no change beyond the ever-present longing before mentioned, and it was due to no efforts on his own part that he did really and actually come to stand in his master's shoes, and, moreover, have the pleasure of seeing that august being don the broken and dilapidated contrivances he wore himself. This is how it happened.

At the close of a hot July day, Roger Wilkins left his office at the usual hour, and made his way westward in pursuance of some matter connected with the business which claimed personal attention. Sauntering along Oxford-street, he turned off suddenly into a quiet and dingy little turning, and drew up in front of a shop which attracted his attention. The casual pedestrian would most likely have passed it by with a brief, uninterested glance, finding nothing in the display of old furniture and china and bric-a-brac of all descriptions that it contained worthy of a closer inspection. Not so Mr. Wilkins. If there was one thing outside his money-grubbing pursuit that he could take an intelligent interest in, it was the acquiring of antiquated objects. In this line nothing came amiss to him, and so long as the commodity was sufficiently aged he was bound to admire it, and, if possible, acquire it, whether it was an old cabinet, or a pocket-handkerchief said to have been used by Julius Cæsar or Edward the Fifth.

On this occasion, true to his natural instincts, he stopped, and began a microscopic examination of the various articles displayed in the shop-window. Very

soon his scrutiny contracted and centred itself on one particular object. This was a dirty and slightly dilapidated-looking old timepiece, that would have seemed expensive to prosaical people at five-and-twenty shillings. Expense, however, was not likely to stand in the way of Mr. Wilkins and his hobby, and, besides, he was willing to allow the usual heavy reckoning for the accumulated dirt and dust over and above the actual value of the article. Quickly making up his mind that he must have that clock at any cost, he entered the shop, and asked for a closer inspection of it.

A funny little old man, who resembled, in point of mustiness and antiquated appearance, his stock-in-trade, attended to his request, and brought the coveted time-piece out of the window and placed it on the counter.

It certainly was a curious-looking old piece of furniture, and the more

Mr. Wilkins examined it the more determined he became to possess it.

"It seems rather rare," he said to the shopman; "I have seen a good many such articles, but I don't remember to have ever met one like this before."

"Rare, sir," replied the man, "I should just think it was! Why, that clock was made by a great German



alchemist in the fifteenth century. It is said to be uncanny and to bring misfortune on its owner. I don't attach much importance to such old legends myself, though. But the story goes that it was made by this philosopher, who spent nearly a life-time over the construction. He had a certain intent in its manufacture; but year followed year without his being able to attain his purpose, and then, growing alarmed at the possibility of dying and leaving his work unfinished, he invoked the aid of the Evil One. This aid was given, so the story goes, in return for a promise too horrible to relate. At a certain hour on a certain day of a certain month a mutual wish between the two people interested to exchange bodies, though retaining their individual personalities, uttered in its presence will take effect and remain in operation as long as the clock is kept going. By this means the alchemist managed to continue his labours for a century and a half, when he disappeared suddenly and mysteriously one day, and was never after heard of. The clock had stopped dead at four, where you see the hands resting now, and no one has ever succeeded in making it go since."

"Oh!" rejoined Mr. Wilkins, deeply interested in this mystical, old-time narrative; "and how did this what's-his-name manage to effect his object? Surely, an old man so near his end could never have got any one to wilfully exchange a young and healthy life for his own, and it seems that there had to be a mutual consent before the charm acted."

"Well, I don't know, sir," replied the other. "He

was a rich man, and mightn't have found so much difficulty as you imagine in getting some poor wretch to exchange his hunger and rags for the luxurious surroundings held out by way of inducement. Money and position were, I expect, as powerful attractions then as now. However, it is said that he didn't lack for volunteers, and precious shabbily he treated the successive inhabitants of his body, if all accounts be true. When once he had got them in his toils, and effected his purpose, they were never heard of again; but whether they died in his stead in the ordinary course of events, or whether he assisted nature and thus effectually preserved his secret, is not known. Such transactions as these were looked upon with small favour in those days, and usually entailed a painful and lingering death for witchcraft on those engaged in them, so that he might reasonably have consulted his safety by disposing of his accomplices after each operation was concluded. At any rate, several gruesome discoveries, made many years later when his house was demolished, would seem to favour this theory."

"Well, I think I will have the clock, nevertheless," said Mr. Wilkins, when the old man had concluded his story. "What is the price?"

"Twenty pounds, sir, and cheap at that," replied the other.

"Five pounds for the clock and fifteen for the legend, I suppose" said Mr. Wilkins, facetiously, at the same time drawing a cheque for the amount. "All right! send it over to my office to-morrow. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir; thank you, sir," replied the shopman, and Mr. Wilkins passed out of the shop, and during the ensuing business transactions forgot the matter entirely except the main pleasing fact that he had acquired another piece of antiquity to add to his collection.

On the following afternoon the clock was duly delivered at Tower-street, and for a time Mr. Wilkins decided to keep it in his private room there. A day or two later he concluded that it might just as well be making itself useful as remain there with its hands fixed in one position. It irritated him to see anything idle—anything that was constructed to work, that is—so he sent round to a clockmaker's in the vicinity, and requested them to see to the matter. A workman called, and after examining the casing and appointments with admiration, and the mechanism with a contemptuous sniff, removed the latter and took it away with him, promising that it should be put in going order shortly.

In due course it was returned, and after being adjusted in its place, the clock was tried and found to keep excellent time. This rather amused Mr. Wilkins, when he recollected the concluding peculiarity of the timepiece mentioned in the legend told him by the shopman. But it formed a serviceable and attractive addition to his office, and that was as far as Mr. Wilkins was concerned about it, and then, having become used to its presence in the usual routine of his busy life, he forgot the clock and the queer powers said to be connected with it altogether.

It is a strange thing, and of course merely a coincidence, but from the time the clock commenced to go misfortune seemed to wait on the usually prosperous and successful City merchant. No great calamity overtook him, it is true; but a succession of petty, though irritating misfortunes attended his business and private affairs, and Roger Wilkins, by no means sweet and even-tempered at the best of times, became more and more morose and unbearable, particularly to his *employés*, who naturally came in for the principal share of his ill-humour.

The first item tending to vexation of spirits, beyond the utterly trivial ones of getting his dinners badly served, and perpetually losing his trains and missing appointments thereby, was the failing to obtain a membership of the County Council, which was just then being formed. The next disaster came in the shape of a conflagration at his private residence, which, although successfully combated, put him to some considerable expense, besides the loss of several cherished articles that probably could not be replaced. One or two other lively incidents kept the ball rolling in this backward direction, and then came the crowning misfortune. Mr. Willis, his cashier, who had been in his service for years, trusted entirely with the business of the firm, went the way of so many cashiers—in a continental direction, along with a few odd thousands belonging to his employer. All efforts to trace him failed. Though lost to sight he was to memory dear, very dear, valued at nearly five thousand pounds, in fact; and Mr. Wilkins had him hunted

after with the inquiring affection of a long-lost relative. Fruitlessly was the search conducted, and at last a new man had to be engaged in his place, and Mr. Wilkins recognised that he had seen the last of his man and his money.

The money was, perhaps, not the most valuable part of this loss, for Mr. Willis had been a capital man of business, and so thoroughly understood the firm's transactions, that, in a sense, he was invaluable, and not to be replaced at a moment's notice. Twenty years' experience in the progressive movements of the firm had given Mr. Willis his value, and his successor was therefore obliged to accept a reduced salary and totally subordinate position under Mr. Wilkins, who took the reins in hand himself, and endeavoured to run the business coach along the intricate paths it had fallen into. A general business depression at that time settled over the City. Trade became stagnant, and strikes and capital and labour disputes did not tend to lighten the gloomy outlook.

All this while Jimmy had stuck to his post. He was still office-boy, although getting rather old and big for such a position; but an occasional rise of a couple of shillings added to his weekly wages seemed to satisfy him and retain his devotion to the firm's service. Envy and admiration of his master's position and wealth were, as of yore, his principal feelings.

"If I was only 'im, what a time I'd 'ave," was the burden of his thoughts. And that was as far as his ambition carried him. No idea of bettering himself occurred to him, and he was quite content to perform

his menial duties, supplemented with those of a junior clerk's, which he had attained to along with the increase of salary.

On the 3rd of April, 18—, precisely at five minutes to four, Mr. Wilkins rang his bell, and Jimmy, whose duty it was, went to answer it. He had been indulging in one of his usual day-dreams during a brief cessation of work, and the glowing mental picture he had called up was still strong upon him when he entered his master's presence. He found Mr. Wilkins in an unusually good frame of mind for a wonder. A successful speculation had surprised him into geniality, and he was almost merry as he directed his young assistant to prepare some letters for the post.

"Why, James," he said, kindly, on looking up and catching that youth's earnest gaze fixed upon him, "you look as though you were speculating on asking me for a rise. What is it?"

"Nothing, sir," stammered Jimmy; "I was only just a-thinking that—I wish I was you, sir."

"Do you, my boy?" replied Mr. Wilkins, startled rather at the unexpected answer, and the knowledge that he was the subject of envy to the humble little lad who obeyed his every beck and call. Then, as the remembrance of his many worries and anxieties and disappointments flashed across his mind, he concluded with a sigh, "I wish you were."

At that moment *the clock over the mantle struck four!*

Had there been a third person in the room then, he would have noticed nothing strange or startling taking place, and to all appearances things remained

exactly as they were a moment ago. But the two concerned realised vaguely that something had happened. Mr. Wilkins suddenly found himself standing on the other side of his table, and confronting his double, who was holding out to him a batch of letters in precisely the same way that he had tendered them to Jimmy to get posted. Jimmy on his part became aware, with feelings of bewilderment, that he had somehow changed places with his master, and he gazed blankly on a sharp-faced, badly-dressed, and dirty-looking boy who stood before him. The boy seemed strangely familiar; but he couldn't remember who it was for the moment.

Mr. Wilkins was the first to recover his faculties, and as the recollection of the old shopman's story came to his mind he began to believe, with a thrill of horror and dismay in doing so, that the metamorphosis had actually taken place, and he dashed



across the room to his washstand, on which was fixed a small glass. Then the fearful conviction that his surmise was correct struck him. It was he, Mr. Wilkins, looking in the glass—of that he was positive; but it was Jimmy's face that stared affrightedly back at him. With a groan the wretched man started back, and,

sinking limply into a chair, covered his face with his hands, and strove to collect his thoughts a bit. Meanwhile, Jimmy stood gazing alternately round him and at the figure crouched in the chair.

For a long ten minutes an intense silence prevailed, and then Mr. Wilkins broke it. He had managed to rapidly review the situation, and formulate a likely plan to reverse matters. Unfortunately for the success of his hopes, he had reckoned on the implicit obedience which his office-boy had always accorded him.

"James," he said, endeavouring to keep the squeaky little voice he had inherited steady and even, "run out and tell the men in the office that I am engaged for the rest of the day, and shall not be able to see any visitors."

"Oh, yer won't. won't yer?" replied Jimmy. "And who may you be when you're a-giving yer orders, eh? You seem to make yerself at 'ome, anyways. Where's my guv'ner?"

"I am your master, you little idiot," said Mr. Wilkins, forgetting in his haste and excitement that, not knowing the story of the clock, the boy might reasonably be excused for not recognising him in his new guise.

"Oh, you be, eh?" said Jimmy, sarcastically, "Well, I begs yer parding, sir. Yer see, I took yer at fust for the boy as cleans the horfice; but if you says you is me master, why, in course you must be." And Jimmy laughed scoffingly at the unhappy figure confronting him.

Somewhat disconcerted by this reception, Mr. Wilkins first of all turned the key in the door to prevent any intrusion before he had made his explanations plain,

and then, going over to the washstand, he brought his looking-glass back to the table.

"Sit down, James, and listen to me," he said, sternly. "In the first place you are James Roberts, aren't you?"

"Yus," replied Jimmy, with a grin of amusement.

"Well," continued Mr. Wilkins, "since you are so sure of that, I will ask you if you know what you are like. For instance, do you resemble me at all?"

"I believes I does, now you comes to mention it," Jimmy admitted. "I was a wondering who yer looked like, and now you've told me."

Mr. Wilkins made no comment. He simply handed his junior the glass, and motioned to him to look into it. Jimmy did so; but the result did not tend to reassure his employer in the least. After one brief gaze the boy wiped the glass and looked again; but the reflection was still the same. Apparently satisfied that there was no deception being practised on him, he, without troubling himself in the slightest about accounting for his altered appearance, replaced the mirror on the table and soliloquised thus:

"S'elp me Bob, if I ain't the guv'ner! Oh, what a time I'll ave!"

With a sinking sense of despair, Mr. Wilkins tried to work on Jimmy's better feelings, and to inveigle him into a promise to accompany him home to Sydenham, and keep in retirement there until the time came round again when they could reverse the spell.

Alas for poor Mr. Wilkins! Jimmy's better feelings were almost *nil*, and he couldn't be brought to see the necessity for these proceedings. As a last resource

Mr. Wilkins set himself to minutely impart the whole story of the clock and its purchase, with the uncanny powers it was proved to possess, to the triumphant youth. He wound up with a pathetic appeal, along with promises of substantial favours, for Jimmy's help to restore him to his proper position.

This proceeding was unwise. It showed at once to the sharp-witted little Cockney the strength and advantages of his own position, and the weakness of his master's.

"You will do what I wish, James, won't you?" reiterated Mr. Wilkins. To which James responded, with a broad grin of intense enjoyment, a laconic, hope-destroying "No fears. What d'yer take me for? I'm guv'ner now, and what a time I'll 'ave! So'll you," he added, with a fiendish grin. "I'll make yer trot about, I kin tell yer; and if yer don't do what I tells yer, out yer goes mighty sharp. See, cocky?"

At this encouraging address Mr. Wilkins completely lost control over himself, and stormed and raved away until forcibly reminded of his changed position by a stinging blow on the ear, administered by his erstwhile *employé*, who then unlocked the communication door and called in one of the clerks.



"Bates," he said, aping the manner of his employer, though he couldn't quite attain to that gentleman's precise, grammatical style of utterance, "just chuck James outside the orfice and come and post these 'ere letters. The young dog 'as been a-giving me some of 'is lip, an' I ain't agoing to put up with it while I'm boss, I'll let 'im see."

Bates stared at his pseudo-employer; but nothing in his scrutiny served to rouse his suspicions that all was not correct. So with a brief "All right, sir," he dragged the imagined saucy youth outside, and confided to his fellow-clerks that the master was "going in for those coster songs, and was practising up the lingo."

On being so unceremoniously precipitated over his own office doorstep, a happy idea occurred to Mr. Wilkins, and he determined to go down to Sydenham and try his fortunes there. He found to his great joy a shilling that he had presented Jimmy with early in the day still untouched in that youth's pocket—how he did bless that act of generosity—and, hoping against hope, he turned towards the railway station. But ill-luck still pursued him. Barely had he got within the precincts of the terminus than a rough and ill-conditioned looking little newspaper boy accosted him.

"'Ello, Jimmy Roberts," he said, in a friendly fashion, "where are you orf to? yer ain't shut up yet, are you?"

"Go away, boy," replied the miserable man, foreseeing fresh difficulties in the encounter. "I mean I am in a hurry, and can't stop now; I'll see you to-morrow."

"Boy yerself," retorted the other, quick to resent the insult. "Who are you calling boy? I'll smack yer in the eye, Jimmy Roberts!"

The boy was evidently not the one to promise without performing; for Mr. Wilkins barely had time to grasp the nature of the promised service when he received a resounding blow which closed up his right optic, and left him to get through the ensuing tussle by the aid of the other. The prompt arrival of a policeman settled the dispute for the nonce, and in the solitude of a police-cell Mr. Wilkins found ample leisure to meditate on his accumulating misfortunes. He was liberated with a caution on being brought before the magistrate in the morning to answer a charge of brawling in a public place, and left the precincts of the court in a miserable, dejected frame of mind to make the best of his way to Sydenham.

He hardly hoped to accomplish much then. Had he been able to get down first he thought he might have managed to do something—what he hardly knew—towards establishing his claim before the usurper arrived on the scene; but this was a forlorn hope, indeed now. However, he decided to go; so, hungry and worn out, he speculated in a ticket, and in the train that was to carry him we will, for a time, leave him.

CHAPTER II.



JAMES ROBERTS felt uncommonly well-pleased with himself as he sat in his master's chair and reflected on the strange metamorphosis he had undergone. He accepted Mr. Wilkins's statement unreservedly. He was not given to believing in fairy tales, and he had only the vaguest ideas concerning things supernatural; but the facts were too plain to admit of doubt; and to Jimmy's uninquiring mind one explanation was as good as another, seeing that the affair had actually come to pass.

An idea suddenly struck him. The limited taste of wealth and importance he had as yet experienced agreed with him remarkably well, and he had a mind to keep the position he had acquired. Obviously it was to his master's interest to oust him from it if possible, and this could only be done by means of the fatal clock that ticked away so unconsciously on the mantel. Jimmy had no present intention of turning off his new office-boy. He retained a measure of gratitude for his unconscious benefactor and had no wish to drive that unfortunate man to desperation; and, besides, it might excite notice and cause remarks which he would have found inconvenient. He didn't suppose for one moment that Mr. Wilkins would be able to obtain credence if he should impart the

story of his woes to any outsider; and besides, he thought he knew his master's disposition too well. Mr. Wilkins would be more likely to trust to his own resources to effect his purpose than to attempt to call in extraneous aid.

But in one or two matters he felt far from secure. In the first place there was his defective speech. Expressions that suited Jimmy the office-boy would be rather out of place in a prominent City merchant, and although the youth had picked up a very fair education during his office experiences, and could write a grammatical letter in decent penmanship, he knew that it would be hopeless to attempt to disguise or hide his speech and Cockney phrasing. Perhaps, he thought, he could account for them and, at the same time, for his utter want of knowledge concerning Mr. Wilkins's personal affairs. At any rate, he held by far the strongest hand, and if he only played the game rightly he could manage to come through safely and enjoy the life that he had spent so many years in envying.

His principal concern just at present was the clock. With Mr. Wilkins about the office at all hours, and able to get free access to it, his own position might be reversed at any moment. So, after much cogitation, he took the fatal timepiece carefully from the mantel and transferred it to Mr. Wilkins's private safe and locked it away there.

Having settled this matter to his satisfaction he decided to leave the office. He found a peculiar pleasure in donning Mr. Wilkins's immaculate tall hat and

overcoat. The wearing of a tall hat had been one of the special prerogatives that he had so much envied when sighing for his master's position. Once or twice during his lowly career fortune had enabled him to just try it on, surreptitiously and with much trepidation in case he should be caught in the act. Now, however, he was entitled to wear it openly and without fear; and he did so, setting it at a jaunty angle and viewing himself in the glass with a ludicrous expression of vanity and self-consciousness.

Having finally adjusted it to his satisfaction, he possessed himself of Mr. Wilkins's gold-headed umbrella and sallied out, calmly leaving the office in a state of untidiness and disorder that would have given a fresh pang to the owner could he have seen it. The change was too recent as yet to allow Jimmy to make any great slip, and he passed through the office with a brief "good-night" which astonished the other *employés*, for the rightful Mr. Wilkins never or very seldom left without a good all-round grumble, and directions sufficient to necessitate one or two of them stopping long after the regulation hour of closing.

Mr. Wilkins had a season-ticket—Jimmy knew this because he had often been dispatched to renew it—and it was with a sense of increased importance that he passed the barrier, where the collectors respectfully saluted him, and entered a first-class carriage. He had been vividly reminded of his past condition on entering the station by noticing a scuffle between two little street boys, terminated as he arrived by the interposition of a policeman, and he dwelt in pleasure

on the events that had removed him from an existence where such episodes were of daily occurrence.

Just as the train was starting, a pompous old gentleman, whom Jimmy recognised as the director of a company in which Mr. Wilkins took a great interest, came along the platform, and, noticing Jimmy, lumbered in, assisted by the guard, and held out his hand, puffing and blowing in the meanwhile over his exertions in getting up to the platform.

"How d'e do, Mr. Wilkins," he gasped. "I hardly expected to see you so late as this."

"What cher, Tubby!" replied Jimmy, seizing the proffered hand and pumping it up and down in exaggerated greeting.

It should be explained that "Tubby" was the nickname for the director, which Bates and Jimmy had bestowed upon him in playful reference to his size, on his frequent calls at the office to see Mr. Wilkins.

"'Ow's bizness?" he went on, scarcely noticing the expression of blank surprise that settled on the other's features at this unceremonious address. "Pretty bobbish, I suppose. I reckon's you makes a good thing out of that 'ere company. I used ter say so ter Bates. But yer a sound old cock, and I reckon we'll git along tergether like a 'ouse-a-fire. D'you remember when you give me a harf-a-quid for a—" He stopped dead, suddenly called to a remembrance of his position by the look of dismay rapidly giving place to one of horror on the director's face.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wilkins," said Mr. Truscott," frigidly, inclined at first to attribute this strange

address to a want of sobriety; yet rather failing even in his perplexity to draw a connection between the wine-glass and this mode of address. Thickness and a want of distinct articulation were the only changes in speech effected by undue libations that he was acquainted with; but what other possible reason could induce the stately, ceremonious Mr. Wilkins to converse like an errand-boy?

Jimmy saw that he had put his foot in it, so to speak, and he quickly cast round for some way out of the difficulty. The only method that occurred to him, that wouldn't involve lengthy explanations, was to sham illness, loss of memory, and all that sort of thing.

"Funny feelings 'ere," he exclaimed, dramatically, striking at his forehead. "'Ad it all day—regler crusher—makes me talk like a corsternmonger—don't hurt when I talks that way; but when I goes to talk rational, it catches me on the 'op and gives me beans. Doctor says it's failure of the brain's action caused by a sudden change."

Jimmy had a sly sense of humour, and couldn't resist the last little joke, while he spun off the mendacious statement in a series of jerks as each explanation occurred to him. Mr. Truscott appeared appeased, although, as a matter of fact, he never forgot or forgave that "Tubby," and it cost the firm many hundreds of pounds before the old gentleman finally relinquished his power to affect mercantile affairs along with a general interest in things terrestrial. They chatted away in seeming amiability though, Jimmy doing as much as possible to hide his imperfections of speech, and accen-

tuating many peculiarities chiefly connected with the "h's" in consequence, until Sydenham was reached. They parted there, and Jimmy, feeling a sense of relief in getting away from his testy acquaintance, made his way up to "The Larches."

Once before, when he first became connected with the firm of Wilkins and Co., Jimmy had been admitted to "The Larches." He had been sent down by Mr. Willis with some papers at a time when Mr. Wilkins was temporarily indisposed, and he had waited in the hall, and gazed about him in boyish awe and wonder while the servant carried his package to her master. His reception was vastly different when he opened the door with his latch-key and stepped inside his new home. The servant who had kept him waiting in the hall on his previous visit now rushed forward to relieve him of his hat and coat, and ushered him into the dining-room. Here he found a tasty little dinner waiting, and he surprised the servants, who had never known their master make such a substantial meal before, by the celerity with which he dispatched it.

Mr. Wilkins was subject to the gout, and therefore by necessity, if not by inclination, was compelled to be abstemious, Not so his successor. Jimmy's staple article of food had been bread-and-treacle, and having all a boy's natural love for luxurious feeding, he promptly disposed of a meal that quickly gave him an insight into some of the drawbacks attaching to the position he had obtained.

The resulting attack of gout induced him not to

attempt to go to the office on the following day. So he settled himself comfortably in his bedroom along with some papers and a box of Mr. Wilkins's choice cigars, and prepared to enjoy the first holiday he had had since he had left school at an early age to, vulgarly speaking, scratch for himself.

He thought as he sat there that the more he saw of his new situation the better he liked it—barring the gout, of course, which was an experience he could have very well done without—and the comfort of his own position moved him to bestow a thought on the unfortunate man whom fate had so cruelly dealt with. While he was wondering if the boy had made his appearance at the office as usual that morning, a servant tapped at the door and informed him that a boy wanted to see him, adding, "I think it is some one from the office, sir."

"I 'spects it is, Mary—yer name is Mary, ain't it?" asked Jimmy.

"Why, no, sir! My name is Jane, sir," replied the astonished girl — she had been in Mr. Wilkins's service nearly four years



and had never known that gentleman at a loss for her name before.

"In course it is," said Jimmy. "My memory ain't

quite as good as it were, Jane. Send the boy up to me and tell 'im to wipe his 'oof—feet I means. And 'ere, I say! Just fetch us another of them custards will yer, an' tell old mother trot-along I'll be ready for me dinner about two."

The girl retired to do his bidding. With the usual manner of her class she badgered the caller with many directions concerning what he was to do and was not to do, until the miserable-looking little lad turned on her and spoke with so much asperity and command that she remained standing open-mouthed at the foot of the stairs long after the visitor had found his own way to her master's presence.

"It was only the office-boy, Martha," she explained to the cook, later. "But he spoke for all the world as if the place belonged to him. He can't be more than sixteen either, and he called me 'my good girl', and told me to hold my tongue and get on with my work."

"Very good advice, too, my dear," replied the cook, between whom and Jane there was very little love lost.

Jane bridled and tossed her head; but another thought occurring to her she lost sight of her indignation in anxiety to impart it.

"Don't you think the master talks funny, Martha," she said, with a giggle. "He puts me in mind of that baker's man, who used to come here with the bread, and hang round after you. This morning he talked quite vulgar until I thought I should have to laugh, and he called me Mary. I really believe he had quite forgotten my name."

While the peculiarities of the master were thus being discussed in the kitchen, the rightful Mr. Wilkins was making a further bid for restoration upstairs.

"What cher, *Jimmy*," was his greeting, with a broad grin, as he entered the room. "You ought ter be at the orfice, you knows. Can't allow any shirking. Slap-up sort of show 'ere, ain't it? 'Ave a cigar? Yer needn't be afraid of 'em. Yo'r used ter smoking. Look 'ere," the usurper went on in a burst of confidence, moved perhaps by a fellow-feeling at seeing the look of misery on the other's face. "Yer needn't make yerself so jolly miserable over this bizness, and yer needn't be spiteful neither. It ain't my fault about this 'ere go, and a rum 'un it is! I didn't do nothink; but now I've got your place yer can't reckon I shall be such a jolly fool as ter give it up, can yer? But I'll tell yer what I'll do. I 'ates work and you likes it, so if I chucks old Gregson an' gives you 'is place with a thumping good screw—none of yer measly ten bob a week, like you give me; but about six quid a week, and lets yer work the show as yer likes—I reckon yer ought to be grateful."

As Jimmy spoke, a twinge of his disorder contracted his features and made him emit a howl of agony, and this as much as anything arrested Mr. Wilkins's peevish discontent, and caused him to see a little of the compensating side of this transaction that he had been so bewailing. The "Old Gregson" referred to was Mr. Willis's successor, and his position, with the extra advantages promised by Jimmy, was not to be sneezed at. Of course, being manager of the firm of Wilkins

and Co. was not comparable with being the firm itself; but then it was a distinct advance on being office-boy of that institution, and besides beggars mustn't be choosers.

Before Mr. Wilkins could bring these reflections to a head Jimmy, having recovered from his attack, resumed the thread of his discourse.

"This'ere cop ain't all jam," he said, referring to the complaint he had inherited along with the remainder of Mr. Wilkins's goods and chattels. "You won't find anything of *this* sort about me, 'cept a touch of toothache when yer don't git yer wittles reg'lar. Well, I was a-going ter say I'll give yer a cheque for a few 'undreds besides, and yer can start yer duties next month. Till then yer can take a 'oliday. Only mind, mum about what's 'appened. I 'ave put the clock in the safe, so there won't be any temptation to yer; but now I comes to think of it I needn't 'ave troubled 'cause I ain't a-going to wish anythink no more, and then it won't do nothink. I've got all I wanted, and if you be'aves yerself you won't 'ave much cause to complain about the way you're treated. And now," he concluded pleasantly, "we've done with bizness, we'll have some grub. You looks as though yer wanted a feed."

He rang the bell as he spoke, and ordered dinner to be prepared, and made his way down to the dining-room assisted by his late employer. Mr. Wilkins lent this aid in a bewildered state of mind, seeing things in a dreamy, unreal light, that may be accounted for by the startling experiences he had undergone during

the last twenty-four hours, combined with bodily weariness and want of food.

He was sensible enough to grasp that he couldn't justly blame the other for taking advantage of the chances Fortune had thrown in his way, and he had sufficient good feeling to appreciate the generosity of conduct, in the untutored, ignorant little Cockney, whose ideas and feelings remained the same, although cloaked in the bodily guise of the influential and wealthy Mr. Wilkins, as they were when he ran errands and did odd jobs for the firm in the City. In his inmost mind he knew that it was more than he himself would have done under similar circumstances, and he resolved rather to make the best possible terms for himself than to spend his time over useless repinings at what was out of his power to help.

After a sumptuous repast, during which Jimmy did the honours with open-handed if boisterous hospitality, Mr. Wilkins felt better and more fit to consider his position. He had been much exercised in his mind while the meal was in progress over the astonishing capacity for food and its proper enjoyment that he now possessed. It was years since he had eaten so large a dinner or enjoyed one so much. Another cause for wonderment and alarm was the sight of the way his host plied knife and fork.

"Really," reflected the original Mr. Wilkins, "it is almost worth the exchange to be able to enjoy life without the constant fear of results hampering your every deed. And judging by the way my young friend is commencing his career, in a week or two

that body of mine will be positively uninhabitable. Even the care I took over its diet didn't save me from painfully frequent days of agony, and if it is to be made the receptacle for large quantities of foodstuff, pitched in without the slightest regard as to their suitability, I think I would almost decline to have it back on any terms."

As an outcome of these reflections, and prompted by a satisfaction of mind that usually attends the conclusion of a good meal in a healthy subject, Mr. Wilkins endeavoured to explain to Jimmy that the digestive organs at fifty required dif-



ferent and slightly more careful treatment than was necessary at sixteen, and he went on to illustrate that the painful attacks, which Jimmy had referred to as rendering his new situation "not all jam," were liable to be intensified by injudicious table indulgences.

Jimmy listened attentively, and then opined that he would rather have the gout and unrestricted diet than possible freedom from pain coupled with dry sherry and chippy biscuits, and having thus philosophically dismissed the matter, he reverted again to the relations between them.

"I suppose you're a-going to take my offer," he

said. "I'm glad I made it, 'cause you don't seem to be at all a bad sort when I comes to know yer, though yer used to be down on me at the orfice. There's no two ways about it, but I'm Mister Wilkins now, and Mister Wilkins I intends to be. I knows you've got a lot of brass, 'cause I've been a-looking at yer bank-books, and finding out what the orfice stands yer in. If you'll stick by me and run that show up in the City, I'll do the square thing by yer, and no kid. I ain't going to do no work. I'm going to 'ave a time, the same as I said I would if I was in your place. I ain't a-going to bear no malice for the way you 'umped me round when I was a orfice-boy. That's done with. You do my work, and 'old yer jor about the clock and things, and I'll do my part so as you won't 'ave to grumble. Are you willin'?"

"Rather like Hobson's choice, isn't it, James?" replied Mr. Wilkins, with a faint smile. "Suppose I say 'No'; what then?"

"You'd be a bloomin' fool for yer pains," said Jimmy, tersely. Jimmy's phraseology was lamentable, but then, you sec, his school had not been a select one. "And yer must call me Mister Wilkins, and I don't know no bloke named 'Obson, and if he 'chucked up six quid a week and went for a orfice-boy, I don't want to neither. I makes the orfer, and you can take it or leave it, as yer chooses."

"Of course I will take it," said Mr. Wilkins. "I can't pretend to be grateful for a minute portion of my own property doled out to me by instalments; but it's good of you to make me the offer nevertheless.

and if I ever get—I mean should there be occasion I will not forget it.”

“That’s the style then,” remarked Jimmy, restored to good humour by the acceptance of his offer. “Now, look ’ere! I’ll give yer a cheque for five ’undred pounds fer a start. You can rig yerself out decent, and stop ’ere with me until I gives old Gregson the push. I owes ’im one for stopping my coin fer bein’ late last week, and out ’e goes. Then you can take ’is place, and things ’ll work smooth and reg’lar. Keep out of the ways of yer noo relations tho’—them as used to be my father, an’ step-mother, an’ ’er sons, is what I advises yer. If they gets to know yo’r a-doing well, they’ll all want to come and live with yer, and take every stiver you’ve got. They did me. When I used ter git ’ome Saturdays with the ten bob you give me, they’d be on it as soon as I got inside the door, and not leave me a tanner fer meself. I ain’t been ’ome for months now, and I didn’t mean to.

“Yer see, my father ’e went and married the woman what kept the greengrocer’s in our court. There was only me left with him after mother died of diptheere, along of my sister; and my step-mother, she’d got a lot of money, and two grow’d-up sons what went round with the cart a-selling the things, and they lammed me orful after father married ’er. She got boozed and lammed me too, and then father ’e ’elped ’er. Then one night father and me brothers all went out on the spree, and they ’ad a row, and father got ’urt and taken to the ’orspittle, and both my brothers got six months’ ’ard. Since then I went ’ome on and orf like, until

they come out of prison, and then I chucked it up and stopped away altogether, and I reckon you 'ad better, too. They ain't nice relations," Jimmy concluded with a grin, "and they might grate on yer feelin's if you was to mix with 'em."

The strangely assorted pair finished out the day together in seeming cordiality. Jimmy, at Mr. Wilkins's prompting, sent up a few necessary directions to the office, and at the close of the evening Mr. Wilkins was shown upstairs to the bed that was usually used when his son was at home from school during the holidays.

A change had taken place in Mr. Wilkins's opinions, and in the solitude of his chamber he reflected long and anxiously over the situation. He didn't sleep much that night; but he spent the time in carefully threshing out the relative positions of his late *employé* and himself, and endeavouring to map out his plan of action.

To his surprise, he found that he did not yearn to any appreciable extent after his lost position now. Of course, the change from his late position to that of a scrubby, hungry, kicked and despised little office-boy was not to be thought of; but the offer held out to him put things on a more even scale, and the compensating clauses, combined with the fact that he really had no option in the matter, induced him to see the brighter side of the situation.

As Mr. Wilkins he had been old—fifty-four—a martyr to gout, lonely, and little liked. For a set-off there had been his great wealth, which he had no use for,

and his influential position, which was chiefly used to benefit people for whom he cared not two straws. In exchange for all this he obtained, as James Roberts, a young and healthy life, a good position and ample means, with a prospect of beginning life again where many men left off both as regards years and income, and backed by a life-long experience in the ways of the business and social world.

In the morning Mr. Wilkins intimated the result of his deliberations to Jimmy, and fully accepted the offer, with the one stipulation that his boy at school should in no way suffer by this transaction.

This Jimmy readily granted, and he kept his promise faithfully as long as he was able. As a further mark of generosity he made the promised cheque out for fifteen hundred pounds, and within a month James Roberts, late Roger Wilkins, Esq., entered upon his duties as cashier and general manager to the firm of Roger Wilkins and Co.

CHAPTER III.



OF course, it was not possible to work such a revolution in a mercantile firm without exciting a great deal of notice and comment, and for a long while the fact that Mr. Wilkins had dismissed his cashier and promoted his office-boy to the post formed the staple theme of conversation amongst the partners and *employés* in the surrounding offices. Such an event was unprecedented in the annals of mercantile life, and the sensation caused thereby was correspondingly great.

The principal trouble Mr. Wilkins encountered was in eradicating the many friendships of his predecessor. The office-boys of other firms would persist in being on terms of intimacy with him, and it took some considerable amount of time and trouble before he could convince them—which he did at the risk of being dubbed “uppish”—that their friendship was undesirable. Then Bates, the junior clerk (a happy-go-lucky young fellow, who troubled himself very little about anything and his work least of all), imagined that he could hold the same intercourse with his new manager as he did when that functionary was office-boy, and only saw in the other’s advancement a splendid chance of neglecting his work unrepented, with a prospect of “working” the previous friendship for his own advantage.

"You are a lucky dog, Jimmy," he commenced, on the first day the other assumed command. "Just fancy the governor giving you old Gregson's place. You'll put in a word for a rise for me, won't you?"

"No, that I certainly will not, Bates," replied James. "And for another thing: you will, for the future, call me Mr. Wil—Roberts, I mean. If you do your work satisfactorily I have no doubt Mr. Wilkins will see that you are properly dealt with; but if you intend doing it in the slovenly fashion I have observed this morning, your services are extremely likely to be dispensed with altogether, I can assure you. Kindly make out these invoices now, and remember what I have told you."

"All right, sir," stammered the abashed youth, as he retired to do the other's bidding.

With these trifling exceptions Mr. Wilkins found his path tolerably easy. The work was hard and responsible; but it was congenial, and he was thoroughly acquainted with it, so this presented no drawback. He applied himself to it with a diligence and long-headedness that caused many who had marvelled at "Mr. Wilkins's insane act in trusting his affairs to a sixteen-year-old boy of menial position and no education" to change their opinions and regard him as being exceedingly lucky to be able to leave his affairs in such trustworthy hands. They had certainly noticed no particular aptitude in the young man when he was employed in a subordinate capacity, they remarked to each other; but it was clear that he must have been possessed of a wonderful business capacity. One or two of them even

took to studying their own office-boys to see if they had not, perchance, a similar unappreciated treasure in their employ. Needless to say, they had not.

During the next month Mr. Wilkins was so intently engaged in forwarding the firm's interests that he almost came to forget that he had ever been any one other than James Roberts, and he attained a degree of happiness and contentment unknown for many years past. One morning, just before going to lunch, he was engaged at his desk when he heard a voice in violent altercation with Bates. It was a feminine voice, though neither sweet nor pleasing, and the burden of its cry was, "I wants ter see my Jimmy! Where's my Jimmy?"

Wondering what on earth the matter could be, Mr. Wilkins left his desk and walked down to make inquiries. He had no need to trouble himself, for the moment the visitor caught sight of him, she exclaimed: "'Ere, you Jimmy, you imp, why ain't you bin 'ome? Your father 'll give it to you when 'e sees yer!"

For a moment Mr. Wilkins failed to grasp the situation, and then he remembered Jimmy's warning to avoid his new relations. This evidently was the woman "who kept the greengrocer's shop," and when Mr. Wilkins came to confront her he saw ample reason in her appearance alone for the warning. Mrs. Roberts was old, and fat, and dirty. To Mr. Wilkins's fastidious eye, indeed, she seemed the concentrated essence of dirt, and he rebelled at the very idea of being connected with such a creature. He was mortified, too, to notice that the rest of the staff were peering

over their desks and enjoying the situation with sly grins and nudges, and in his anger and impatience he lost control of himself entirely.

"You have made some mistake, my good woman," he said, with cold disgust.

That "my good woman" did the business completely, and for the next ten minutes

the offender lived in an atmosphere of vituperations that stunned him. Mrs. Roberts's was, of its kind, a masterpiece of oratory. I can't give it in detail, because being a lady of the slums she talked as slum ladies have a way of talking when their gentle spirits are perturbed. There was no straying from the subject and wandering off into side issues. It was concise and complete, and chiefly concerned itself with the heinous offence of getting "uppish," and the crying sin of ingratitude. After informing him that he was "a nasty, dirty, stuck-up little wiper wot have turned agin the 'and wot brought yer hup" (the worthy dame omitted to make mention of the boots that had materially assisted in the operation), she dwelt a bit on the misery of his family "what was a-starving with 'unger" and then went off into a fit of hysterics on the floor, leaving Mr. Wilkins in a



state of bewildered perplexity, and wondering whether he ought to call a doctor or a policeman, or get out of it and leave some one else to bear the brunt of the old lady's indignation.

He concluded on the latter course; but the old dame was not too far gone to note the stratagem, and being handicapped by her recumbent position, she marked her sense of his mean trick by propelling after him one of her boots, which got to the street through the office window about the same time that he did through the more usual place of exit. Glad to escape so easily, he went off to his luncheon and purposely dawdled away the time so as to allow the irate female who claimed to be his mother ample opportunity to get clear away from the office before he returned. In this he was successful, and, finding himself unmolested further, the recollection of the encounter gradually faded from his memory.

Mr. Wilkins's life as James Roberts, the cashier, was not particularly eventful, so we may safely leave him to pursue his arduous but congenial duties awhile to call in at Sydenham and see how the usurper was enjoying his share of the transaction.

While the novelty of the thing lasted, Jimmy passed a first-rate time, and then the restlessness of his own natural disposition asserted itself, and he began to find things dull. He found the joys of being "mistered" very transitory, and even the satisfaction of having plenty of money at his command failed to console him at times.

"What was the use of it?" he would ask himself. If he could utilise it for the purpose of buying Tommy

Riggs's goat, or for acquiring a better stock of peg-tops or marbles than Bill Tomkins's, there would be some pleasure in possessing it; but just to see it recorded in his bank-book failed to give him any great amount of satisfaction. To do him justice, he didn't want to work, and as far as the evasion of *that* was concerned, he had no fault to find with the change; but when it came to playing, it was quite another matter.

He was walking up from the station one day, on his return from a visit to London, when his way was obstructed by a couple of little boys who earned a precarious living by making believe to keep a crossing clean and passable. They had mapped out a series of lines on the pavement with chalk, and were enjoying a game of hop-sotch. Personally I have no knowledge of this pastime. I only know that it is played with a bit of broken tile or a stone, which requires to be kicked about inside these lines, and hopped after. Jimmy, on the contrary, was thoroughly conversant with the game, and if there was one thing more than another that he had a weakness for, it was hop-sotch.

He stopped, he hesitated, and he who hesitates is lost. A quarter of an hour later the incomers on the London train were edified, and shocked or amused



according to their dispositions, by the sight of one of their leading citizens, in tall hat and immaculate dress, with umbrella and bag waving wildly in the air, hopping along the pavement behind a minute fragment of pantile, and eagerly contesting the points of the game with two dirty ragged little urchins, in dialogue equally as bad as theirs.

"Yer cheatin," said one. "Warn't 'e daown, Bill?"

"Yus," said the other.

"Yer lie," said Jimmy, pointedly if not politely, and those of the spectators who were not too scandalised laughed aloud, and drew Jimmy's attention to his audience.

"We gits too old fer this sort of thing, don't we?" he remarked to a gentleman he knew, with a furtive grin.

"I think we *ought* to, certainly, Mr. Wilkins," replied the other, frigidly. He turned and walked on as he spoke, and Jimmy, just stopping to give his playmates all the loose coppers he had in his pocket, hurried after him.

No further allusion was made to the topic; but the icy politeness of his companion served to remind Jimmy that he would do well for the future not to allow his inclinations to get the better of his discretion. As it was, that harmless little episode did him a vast amount of mischief. It was talked about for days after, and many people, whose susceptibilities had already been wounded by the manners and speech of Mr. Wilkins, began seriously to debate on that gentleman's sanity. Weakness of intellect covers a multitude of sins, and the more charitable amongst them were willing,

even anxious, to throw this mantle over the wilful transgressor of social laws.

For a time Jimmy concluded to put the thought of boyish amusements out of his mind, and went in for a round of more mature gaieties instead. He tried theatre-going; and diversified this with visits to more questionable places of entertainment. To his credit it may be stated that he found no more attraction in the latter than in the former, and neither supplied the "long-felt want" he was in search of.

A trip to one or two seaside places did relieve the monotony of his existence greatly, and if it hadn't been for the loneliness he would have been very well satisfied to have passed a few months in going the round of them. But the loneliness of his position was the great drawback to his happiness all through, and it was rapidly becoming more than he could tolerate. Most of the friends he had acquired with his position had fallen off in disgust, alienated by "the vulgar, uneducated manner of speaking Mr. Wilkins had dropped into," and his business acquaintances were making the same move and for the same reason, combined with the fact that his total neglect of all business affairs had reduced his once valuable patronage to a mere fraction.

A few weeks after he had installed Mr. Wilkins in his new capacity, Jimmy had received a letter asking him to take the chair at a banquet given in connection with some city benevolent institution. His eagerness to enjoy to the full his new position, and a desire to be present at some of these gatherings, about which

he had heard so much, induced him to consent, and on the appointed evening he duly made his appearance at the place of meeting. After a substantial dinner had thawed the assembled company into geniality, and opened a likely avenue to their purses and cheque-books, the business of the evening was gone into, and it devolved upon Jimmy to address the expectant mob with the formidable array of statistics, prepared for him, sandwiched in with an extempore little speech to help down the figures, and to impress the importance and necessity of the institution on his hearers.

Mr. Wilkins was very popular at these meetings, and his speeches were always considered well worth listening to. They were effective, too, and many an after-dinner collection in aid of some deserving charity attained unexpected figures owing to his oratorical efforts. Therefore there was expectancy written on the faces of the company when Jimmy rose to do his part.

"It says 'ere," began Jimmy, tapping his memorandum paper, and plunging bodily into his subject, "that last year we roped in more an' five 'undred quid, which is a lot of oof. But when yer comes to consider what that oof 'as got ter do, it ain't nothink worth speakin' about. What we wants



is coin, and I kin only 'ope you'll all shell out 'andsome and look pleasant."

That was all. It is probably the briefest after-dinner speech on record; but it was startling in its effects. By the time he had finished, his audience were in a state of uproarious merriment; but the proceeds of his exhortation would barely have served to sweep the chimneys of the institution it was intended to benefit, for the ensuing year. Whether the speech was regarded in the light of a practical joke on the part of Mr. Wilkins or not I cannot say; but he was never invited to take the chair again, and his services on behalf of charitable societies were not solicited further than to donate an occasional cheque.

Thus it was that in the City and at home Jimmy's peculiarities unfitted him for his position, and left him in danger of dying of *ennui*, or, as he more forcibly described it, "a-croakin' of the 'ump." Before this melancholy catastrophe could take place, he chanced to make the acquaintance of a neighbour, and the resulting excitement lasted him until the end of—I mean for a long while.

Mr. Jabez Butterly was the gentleman's name. He was a retired butcher, and perhaps by reason of his late calling, or more likely from his many vulgarities of manner and speech, found his position at Sydenham rather isolated. The neighbours looked at him askance, and kept aloof. When I say neighbours, of course I mean the wealthy and influential minor section of the community. Men such as Mr. Wilkins it was whose

society Mr. Butterly endeavoured to cultivate, and these would have none of him.

Truth to tell, this was not such a matter of regret to Mr. Butterly as it should have been. For himself, he would have been quite content with the friendship of men of his own pattern, who had known him in business, and respected him in spite of the lack of superficial qualities that are reckoned to mark the difference between a man and a gentleman. But Mrs. Butterly was far from content. She was of an ambitious nature, and yearned passionately to get into "society" circles. Hence when fortune smiled on her better-half, and allowed them to fortify their misplaced "h's" with a few odd thousands, she ruthlessly cut herself adrift from the Smiths who sold tea, and the Jenkinsees who purveyed drapery, and vowed a vow to associate with the best or none. This ambition she kept well before her spouse, and urged him daily, and nightly, too, to endeavour to get on friendly terms with their neighbours.

The worthy couple had a daughter, a pretty, unaffected girl of nineteen, who had managed to run the gauntlet of a boarding-school education, with a Continental "finish," without getting spoilt in the process. This daughter was the motive of her maternal parent's endeavours to get entrance to the best houses. Minnie—Miss Butterly—was pretty and attractive, and that, backed by her pa's money-bags, ought to succeed in winning her a "real gentleman" for a life-partner. That was what the good lady thought, and when Mrs. Butterly thought anything she generally said it, over and over

again. She did so in this case until Mr. Butterly groaned, and rebelled inwardly at the necessity for toadying to "the beastly stuck-up lot" around him, while his daughter smiled quietly, and wondered over a certain curly-headed young man who had made her acquaintance by assisting her out of some trifling but embarrassing predicament on one occasion recently in the City. She did not even know his name, but indulged, maiden-like, in sighs and day-dreams over the incident.

Mr. Wilkins had all along been the principal game aimed at by the place-hunting old lady, and owing to her machinations Mr. Butterly had endeavoured frequently to cultivate the wealthy merchant. Mr. Wilkins had been cold and haughty, and had frozen these overtures into a state of torpor, so that even Mrs. Butterly was compelled to admit that the right of entry to "The Larches," with the ultimate prospect of becoming mother-in-law to its owner, was remote, and, in fact, impossible.

One evening Mr. Butterly was returning from town in company with his daughter when he espied the object of his wife's admiration and his own private detestation a little way on in front of him, walking slowly along and whistling fragments of certain popular songs.

"There's Mr. Wilkins, Minnie," he announced suddenly, on catching sight of him. "I wonder if 'e'll speak?"

"I wouldn't trouble him to, dad," replied the young lady, with a touch of hauteur at the implied supposition that her parent was not good enough to be spoken to by Mr. Wilkins or anyone else.

Mr. Butterly didn't hear her remark, or else intentionally ignored it, and just then getting abreast of the object of his speculation he, remindful of past snubs, ventured on a timid, "Good hevening, Mr. Wilkins," and half extended his hand at the same time.

"Ow hare you?" said Jimmy, without the vaguest idea as to whom he was addressing, dropping his umbrella and seizing the proffered hand.

To say that Mr. Butterly was surprised inadequately, expresses the state of his feelings. Paralysed is a better word. This reception was so very different from the usual frigid "Good-night," that it took him some minutes to recover his faculties and present his daughter. He managed to do this at last, and was further delighted by the kindly courtesy with which it was received.

"Your dorter, eh!" said Jimmy, dropping the father's hand and turning to the young lady with an expression of undisguised admiration. "And a werry nice gal, too," he remarked after a lengthy survey, which didn't tend to raise the young lady's opinion of his manners to any great height. "And what may your name be, miss?" he inquired, playfully.

"My *friends*," with a stress on the 'friends,' "usually call me Minnie," was the reply, with a disdainful little pout which only served to enhance her beauty, though her manner would have discouraged anything with quicker perception than an alligator or—Jimmy.

He was not discouraged in the least. He talked to both father and daughter as though he had know them all his life and was on terms of the closest intimacy

with them. His affability didn't stop there, for when they got to "The Larches" nothing would suit him but that Mr. Butterly should go in with him and pass half-an-hour in his company. The other was nowise backwards, and after seeing his daughter safely home, he returned and spent the first really enjoyable evening he had had since leaving his shop and cronies at Spitalfields to become a gentleman at Sydenham.

The worthy pair got on excellently well together. They were similar in habits, and manners, and speech, and with a box of Mr. Wilkins's cigars and a decanter of a compound known as whiskey between them, the hours flew by unnoticed.

Mr. Butterly wondered how on earth he could have judged Mr. Wilkins to be uppish and stiff. Why, he was affability itself, and when they parted for the night, it was with mutual expressions of undying friendship, and a promise on the part of Mr. Wilkins to call round the next day and make the acquaintance of Mrs. Butterly.

Meanwhile, that lady at home was on tenter-hooks of expectation. She had been duly informed of the encounter by her daughter, who pronounced the gentleman under discussion "odious," and dismissed the matter from her mind, to return to dreams of the unknown swain previously mentioned. Visions of social triumphs galore served to put the old lady in an amiable, contented frame of mind, and the news her husband imparted when he did return in the wee small hours of morning in no sense lessened her satisfaction.

When she did make Jimmy's acquaintance, on the

following day, Mrs. Butterly was somewhat surprised at the laxity of his speech. She was fully awake to the peculiarities of her husband's diction, and had long striven, vainly, to correct or gloss them over; but now that a gentleman of such undoubted respectability as Mr. Wilkins used the same terms and phrases, she rather inclined to look on them as permissible, if not actually the "correct thing."

Now, it must be remembered that Jimmy was young in temperament and disposition, and, although having the outward appearance of fifty-four, at heart was as impressionable as a boy of twenty. Small wonder it is, then, that being so closely associated with the Butterlys, and backed by the esteem and encouragement of both parents, aided in no little degree by the solitariness of his own situation, Jimmy's fan-



cies seriously turned to thoughts of love, and the object of these thoughts was Miss Minnie Butterly. The following week or two were by no means periods of unalloyed bliss to that unfortunate young lady. Pressed eagerly by her elderly admirer on the one hand, and entreated and coerced in turns by her mother on the other, she began to wish Mr. Wilkins at the bottom of the deep blue sea, or elsewhere, so long as

she was free from his attentions; and she positively welcomed the periods of comparative rest she experienced when that gentleman's hereditary complaint kept him an unwilling prisoner at his own home.

"He is a vulgar, uneducated old man," she exclaimed in tearful anger for the fortieth time, when pressed by her mother to gracefully say "Yes," and take Mr. Wilkins, with his property and position, for better or worse, as the case might be. "He's older than father, and I won't marry him!"

She probably would have done so, though, if left to her own unaided efforts, for circumstances may be stronger than a maiden's will; but Providence kindly stepped in and delivered her from so unkind a fate, and left her free in after years to again meet, and finally to marry, the object of her choice. This is how it occurred.

It happened one hot day in July that Mr. Butterly and family encountered Jimmy in the City, and at a casual reference to the firm of Roger Wilkins and Co. the latter, then and there, offered to take them down and show them over the office. He did so, and for the first time since leaving on that memorable evening, nearly twelve months since, he set foot across the threshold of the place he had so often swept out in bygone days.

Bates saw the party first, and whispering, "Here's the guv'nor," to the other clerks, fell to writing as though his life depended on it.

"'Ello, Jimmy! Ow's things going on—all right?" the "governor" remarked pleasantly to his manager,

and with a brief nod passed on to his sanctum, leaving Mr. Wilkins to recover from his astonishment at the visit, and admire at his leisure the cool audacity of his successor.

Having installed his visitors comfortably, Jimmy sent out for some light refreshment for the ladies, with something sterner and more potent for himself and Mr. Butterly, and especially endeavoured to make himself agreeable to Miss Minnie by information, largely drawn from his imagination, anent the operations of the firm.

He explained the nature and use of the various articles contained in the room, and had the satisfaction of noting that the object of his adoration was showing more interest in his concerns than she had ever before vouchsafed.

"This 'ere is where I keeps my private papers and billydoos," he said, gaily, pointing out the small safe in the corner of the room. He opened the door for her farther inspection, and exposed to the light of day the clock that had been such a friend indeed to him.

"Oh, what a lovely old clock!" exclaimed the young lady, enthusiastically. Had it been the real, instead of the pseudo, Mr. Wilkins aspiring to her hand, he would have stood a much better chance, for old furniture was a taste that they could have shared in common. "Do let me see it."

How could Jimmy refuse such a request? He didn't try. "Well, don't go a-wishing nothink," was all he said, and he brought out the admired article, and carefully deposited it on the table. It was still going,

and registered exact time, which proves that it must have been constructed to run for periods of time counted by years. Otherwise it would have worked down.

"It's a daisy, ain't it?" remarked Jimmy, pleased at the admiration displayed by his pretty little acquaintance. "I'd give it to yer, only it would be rather sneakish after what it done for me."

"Oh! I wish you would," was the reply, and the young lady stepped forward the better to inspect the carving.

How it happened she did not rightly know, and neither did any one else; but the next moment the timepiece was on the ground, and Mr. Butterly, who was hurrying up to see the article that was exciting so much notice, placed his heavy boot squarely on the face and flattened the wheels and works into a pancake.

"I am so sorry——" began Minnie, in almost tearful tones. She had doubtless caught some part of her drapery in the clock, and so caused the catastrophe. The rest of the sentence remained unsaid.

"It does not matter in the least, my dear young lady. In fact, you have done me an inestimable service," came in stern precise tones from Mr. Wilkins.

It *was* Mr. Wilkins who was speaking; but there seemed to have been some sudden change in him. It seemed to be a different Mr. Wilkins from the one who had been entertaining them five minutes back, and they felt almost as though it were some one else talking. As a matter of fact it was; but they never

knew it. James Roberts—the rightful James Roberts—knew it when he found himself sitting before a bewildering paper of calculations and estimates, of the purport of which he hadn't the remotest idea. Mr. Wilkins knew it when he gathered up the pieces of the clock preparatory to making it the centre of a bon fire which he did the moment after he had courteously, but not cordially, dismissed his visitors.

Once again the firm of Roger Wilkins and Co. changed its cashier, and once again Roger Wilkins became Roger Wilkins. With the bestowal of a few hundred pounds and a little well-meant advice, James Roberts was excluded from the precincts of the office, and became swallowed up in the vortex of London's surging crowds. Thus ended the strange adventure of Roger Wilkins.

The Gratitude of an Outcast.

A LITERARY COMEDY.

CHAPTER I.

WHICH IS EXPLANATORY.



HERE are certain points in connection with this story for which I do not desire to be held responsible, so perhaps it will be as well, in the first place, if I explain

how it came into my hands.

We were a high-class literary company, and we had foregathered—a small and select party of us—in the corner of the smoking-room of an institution well known to the Fleet-street brethren of the pen. We were smoking and moralising. All really high-class literary men smoke, as long as they or their friends have anything fit to, that is, and moralise whenever they can get a silent and attentive audience, which, in the interests of truth and journalistic reputation, I must state is not often. But at that particular moment there was a lull in the conversation, and Slater, a heavy-minded individual who represents *The Wrangler*, true to the instincts of his profession, took immediate advantage of it to heave his three-ha'penny screw of stale moralising into our midst.

“Man's morality is measured by a standard of con-

venience and custom," he commenced, *à propos* of nothing in particular.

"Spare us," we murmured.

"Slater is right, nevertheless," said Brown, and he said it as one who speaks of a miracle. "I don't believe there is a man living who wouldn't adjust that standard to suit his own purposes if it were not fixed by popular opinion at a reasonably practical working level. Take a case in point! You know that little thing that appeared anonymously in *Tribley's* last week?"

We didn't know it; but that was a detail.

"Well, it wasn't bad of its kind," he went on, modestly, as the development shows. "Just to see what they would say, I went and congratulated four of our fellows about it at haphazard, just where I could catch them, and they all acknowledged it, blushing and simpering like so many schoolgirls. It nearly made me sick to see them."

"But how do you know that they may not have collaborated?" I inquired.

"Because I wrote it myself," rejoined Brown, with a pregnant chuckle.

We thought the joke rather a good one for Brown, and Murdoch—a terribly quiet man is Murdoch—asked him to let us have a look at the story. Brown handed it over, and he took it and read it out to us. We were surprised, because it was really an excellent thing, and, we should have thought, beyond Brown's reach.

"B., my boy," said Murdoch, quietly, with a

friendly slap on the shoulder, "you would make an excellent drunkard, but as a liar you lack originality and style. You will find *your* story very ably continued by Gontcharoff, but I don't think it has been translated yet."

"Oh, did Gontcharoff write it?" queried Brown, noways abashed. "I thought it was Hungarian."

"Not at all, my boy," was the pleasant response. "Pure Russian. I have got the original at home, if you would like to see it. But let this be a warning to you not to meddle with matters you don't understand, and, above all, don't trifle with anonymous writings; it may not end as pleasantly as a case I recollect."

We scented a story immediately, and Murdoch's stories are good and worth hearing; so we straightway set to work to extract it. He was good-humoured that afternoon, and a little pressing, and a friendly offer of a weed of a kind his soul particularly loveth, accomplished our purpose and drew him out. We waited patiently for the tobacco to take effect, while Murdoch lolled in his chair, with his arms folded behind his head, and his eyes half-closed in dreamy meditation—which is his wonted position. I have seen that man dictate a three-column leader in the




self-same attitude. He says it inspires him. I tried it for inspiration, and got a backache and a stiff neck, which may be accounted for by the fact that I had not brought myself up to it.

Ten minutes by the clock we watched and waited, and then, without preface or preamble, Murdoch started off on his story, which is duly set down in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II.

WHICH INTRODUCES A WIDOW AND HER LODGER.

T was Mrs. Jinkle's piano that began it. Mrs. Jinkle was an elderly widow of placid mien and fair proportions, though, in flat contradiction to her personal appearance, she was neither courteous nor kindly. Mrs. Jinkle had seen better days. At one time, when the late lamented Jinkle had walked the earth, a thing of life though hardly of beauty—for he was, be it known, stout, not to say obese, with an ill-favoured visage and a penchant for malt liquor, and indeed, any and every variety of liquor generally excluded from the temperance list—she had had her own very comfortable little semi-detached suburban dwelling, and had kept her servants. and been accounted favoured of fortune by her feminine acquaintances, who flocked out on frequent occasions to take tea with her, and to condole with each other on the shortcomings of their respective “hubbys.”

But, alas! poor Jinkle had died, of dropsy some said, and of drink said others, and had left his sorrowing helpmeet a trifling sum of money, and their home with all its fixtures, as a very slight compensation for his unavoidable absence.

Now, Mrs. Jinkle was a sensible woman, a very

sensible woman indeed. Her self-reliance was astonishing and her business instincts were keen. Even when standing beside the grave of the defunct Jinkle, she was pondering on the situation; between her sobs on the way home to the desolate house, she elaborated her plan, and by the time the friendly troop of mourners had fortified their systems with sundry cups of tea, probably with the idea of furnishing moisture for the supply of their lachrymose glands, which had been heavily taxed during the sorrowful duty of the afternoon, she was in a position to announce that her future was definitely formed and decided upon.

A month later Mrs. Jinkle was installed in a dim and dingy residence in Nelson-square S. E., and a card of invitation, conspicuously displayed in the front window, announced to all and sundry that apartments at moderate rates and with all the convenience, cleanliness, and comforts of home could be had within by gentlemen of respectability and moderate means. The contents of the suburban house had been sold off, with a few exceptions, and the house itself let to some desirable tenants—as a source of income and a provision which might be reasonably expected to help the finances of the new venture.

Mrs. Jinkle was soon justified in her action, and able to congratulate herself on the energetic measures she had taken, as well as in her firm belief in her own infallibility. The card of invitation was displayed for one brief fortnight, and then withdrawn only to make its appearance when a social change upwards or downwards, or matrimonial, which includes both,

sent one or another of her charges from the sheltering care of her select establishment.

Gerard Ranger was amongst the first to arrive and, the preliminaries having been satisfactorily settled, take up his residence in the two rooms comprising the first floor—a dignified position which entitled him to a superior standing and consideration at the hands of Mrs. Jinkle and her small servant. This same Gerald Ranger, beloved of Mrs. Jinkle for his courteous, cheery manner—"haffability," Mrs. Jinkle termed it—and a nature that was easily satisfied and not given to grumbling at domestic vexations, was a young fellow of twenty-three. He was a newspaper man, and had come up to London after a brief experience of provincial journalism, which had given him a confidence in himself and his ability hardly justified by his subsequent experiences. He had been full of health and hope and stern determination on his arrival; but repeated disappointments had toned this down to the finest limits, and actual privation and distress had been his portion before a chance opening in a new and promising weekly obtained him the wherewithal to live, and resuscitated his hope and belief in the future.

Back in the past he had committed the unspeakable folly of falling in love, and any one who knows anything whatever of the subject will readily admit that love and an unimproving position, which includes a salary of thirty-five shillings weekly, are not compatible.

Gerald Ranger would not readily have admitted that his position and prospects were as unpromising

as they really were. He dabbled in literature in his evening hours, and turned out short stories and sketches of no unusual merit, although the occasional acceptance of one or another of his efforts by a kindly editor gave him an extra pound or two, welcome in itself, but additionally and principally so in supporting his cherished dream of the days to come, when the work of his pen should be accorded that recognition and support which he believed to be really its due. And so strong is this same belief in the young literary aspirant that scores of rejections count as nothing against the fact of one acceptance.

CHAPTER III.

WHICH INTRODUCES A PIANO.



O go back a bit, one piece of Mrs. Jinkle's household effects had been preserved from the general dispersal, and had accompanied her on her pilgrimage Londonwards. This was her piano, that badge of respectability which no consideration would have induced her to part with. It was a cheap and gaudy instrument of German construction, but it had been the pride of her early married days. when her dead Joseph had returned with it in the greengrocer's van, borrowed for the occasion, and deposited it in the place of honour in the parlour, an object of veneration by reason, if for no other, of representing twenty hard-earned and long-saved pounds. Mrs. Jinkle couldn't play, neither could her husband for that matter; but this fact did not save it from practical attention and hard usage. She knew the notes, and she knew the scales; she could and did play easy hymn-tunes on Sundays, and pick out popular and hackneyed airs with one fat, short finger at odd times during the week. This gave her relaxation and a quiet, sensuous satisfaction, and what more could reasonable woman desire in return for an original outlay of twenty pounds? People have been known to spend ten times that amount on a whim,

or a brief, fleeting enjoyment of a few weeks, and not extract anything like the satisfaction which Mrs. Jinkle's piano gave her. And, to go back to the very beginning, Mrs. Jinkle's piano began it.

Gerald Ranger had arrived home from the office, tired, worried, and short-tempered. Even a pipe could not soothe him into a proper and fit state of mind to contemplate his work. Ideas were elusive, and words were halting or absent altogether; and then Mrs. Jinkle commenced her performance immediately under the room in which he was sitting. Thoughts of his lady-love had intruded into his fictional attempts; hopes for the future were blended in the doubts and fears concerning the present; and the addition of that squeaky pianoforte solo was the crowning incident. It irritated him to the verge of desperation, and throwing his pen down, he donned a mackintosh, sought his still reeking umbrella, and wandered out into the pelting rain, with no particular object, save, perhaps, to get away from that piano and be alone with his pipe and his pre-occupation.

Round and round the square he trudged, and then some indistinct idea led him out into the main thoroughfare, over the bridge, and through the City. The City is not a good place at any time for a man to indulge his thoughts in, and on a wet evening it is particularly inconvenient, not to say dangerous. It requires a steady persistence and a cool mind to successfully make one's way through a tangle of rapidly-moving umbrellas, and recognising this, and feeling his inability and unfitness to manipulate his own and

to elude other people's. Ranger turned out of the Strand and crossed Waterloo-bridge, just as the clock on the Parliament Houses chimed the hour of nine.

A fog had risen over the river, and the rain was coming down harder than ever when he reached the Surrey side; but such minor details didn't even claim his attention. There was a landing-stage just under the bridge on the left-hand side in crossing, where boats were let out on hire, and it occurred to him that there, or probably on one of the barges that are usually to be found drawn up against it, he would find a spot so se-

cluded and silent that it might as well for all practical purposes, be set down in the midst of a wilderness. He could muse there in solitary state to his heart's content; no one would trouble him or interfere with him, and only the indistinct hum of passing traffic would serve




to remind him that he was in the habitation and haunts of man. And thither he went, first dodging a moist-looking policeman, who might, had he

observed his proceedings, have arrested him for suicidal intentions.

The tide was well up, and in a brief space he was sitting on the edge of a barge, with his feet dangling over the water and his back comfortably propped up against a sack of wheat, while he smoked his pipe, and mused on love and literature and the difficulties of the world, principally as they affected Gerald Ranger and his hopes and aspirations.

CHAPTER IV.

WHICH DETAILS AN ACT AND A RESCUE.

ALF-PAST nine, ten, and eleven rang out in successive quarters from the surrounding churches and clock-towers, as Ranger sat there with his pipe and his perplexities; and then, just when he began to turn his thoughts homewards, he noticed with a start that he was not alone. So preoccupied had he been that a figure had walked the length of the landing-stage without attracting his attention, and his silence and stillness had evidently not betrayed his presence to the unknown one, who was gazing down into the dark current with a listless intentness that horribly betrayed his purpose. Ranger could discern nothing more than the fact that it was a man who stood there, and with some curiosity he leant over and waited for the development of one of life's dun-coloured dramas being played under his feet.

With something that betokened a sob the individual at length roused himself from his dreary contemplation and curious thoughtfulness, removed his hat and overcoat, laying them down beside him with a method and precision that accorded ill with his desperate purpose, and seemed, at best, but useless and wasted care. He then returned to his old place at the edge of the platform; but at this stage his proceedings were inter-

rupted, for Ranger, deeming that the time for interference had arrived, and having no anxiety for a midnight swim in search of a man who could not even be expected to be grateful for the action, had his hand firmly fixed in the other one's collar.

"I don't think I would do that if I were you," he remarked, quietly; and somewhat inconsequently he added, as a perfectly good and sufficient reason: "It's cold and wet, and as likely as not you would get drowned. You have no idea of the strength of that current, and maybe you would discover that getting in and getting out again bear no proportion in the matter of difficulty of accomplishment."

The man stared blankly at this address, as well he might, and then struggled to release himself from the other's grip; but vainly, for Gerald, besides being young and strong, had made a good firm clutch at the collar in the first instance, and was not to be shaken free by the struggles of a man weak from want of food, and elderly in the bargain. Still the other remained silent, and Ranger was beginning to find the situation strained when, without any warning, the captive dropped into the water between the stage and the barge, and by sheer weight pulled Ranger off his perch into the water with him.

Ranger muttered words of strange sound and witty brevity as the nature of the manœuvre dawned upon him under the stimulating influence of the cold water; but there was no time then to consider problems, unless it was the grand problem of getting back to dry land once more, and this seemed to promise a difficult

and dangerous operation. He still retained his grasp on the companion of his involuntary bath, but judging by the desperate efforts that companion was making, it was pretty evident that he was willing and anxious to be left to his own devices and to drown in peace. This was contrary to Ranger's ideas, however, and as the tide swept them under and clear of the bridge towering above them, he imparted a few of his views concerning the situation to the author of his plight, and he did it in a way that carried conviction and compelled assent.

"Look here, you fool," he remarked, grimly, "if you will not be quiet and assist me in getting back to the shore, I will throttle you into silence, and drag you in myself and hand you over to the police to be dealt with. You know what that will mean. If, on the contrary, you are sensible, I may further consider the matter when we get back to shore—if we ever do get back, that is."

The man evidently grasped his meaning, for he ceased struggling and even made a few feeble strokes on his own account, which relieved Ranger of his weight for the minute and enabled him to form some definite plan of escape. He was getting tired out by that time, and the weight of his saturated clothing was drawing him deeper and deeper, so that it was a matter of minutes only before he must either go under the water or out of it. Fortunately for himself, the fates who arrange these little matters between themselves had elected in favour of the latter contingency, and barely had the knowledge of the extreme

danger of his position forced itself before his mind when his hand first struck and then firmly grasped a barge's mooring-line which was lying loosely on the water as the tide swung her into shore.

His first idea was to clamber aboard by its aid; but, recognising the difficulty of this operation under the circumstances, and reflecting that the other end of that line would be found fastened somewhere on the shore, he commenced to swarm along it, and, a few minutes later, found himself at the edge of a small wharf lying between the two bridges. He assisted his companion on to it, and then climbed up himself, and stood there with the object of his solicitude, very wet and chilled through, minus his hat and umbrella and pipe, but otherwise none the worse for his uncomfortable adventure.

"And now what are we going to do?" queried the unknown, speaking for the first time, and in a quaintly jocular manner that was half-defiant and half-indifferent.

Not unnaturally, Ranger was resentful and half-inclined to be surly; but there was something in that calm inquiry so oddly at variance with the events preceding it that he felt almost moved to laugh outright. A casual listener might have imagined that the two had been companions in some unfortunate mishap such as the upsetting of their pleasure-boat, and would have been far from guessing the real explanation of the presence of those soaked and sorry-looking individuals standing out there on a deserted wharf together at that hour of the night.

"Well, I am going home to get dried and warmed

again," Ranger replied. slowly, "and I think you had better go——"

"To the police-station, or the devil," the other interjected. "Thanks; but I bar the first, and you seem to have a prejudice against the last. You might just as well have left me alone. It would have been much more easier and safer for you, and more satisfactory to me."

"——along with me," Ranger continued, ignoring the interruption.

"When I am dry and warm I will consider the matter: just now I don't feel inclined to consider anything irrelevant to those conditions. Come on!"

And the man followed him like a lamb.



CHAPTER V.

WHICH DEALS WITH THE COMMONPLACE.



WITH some little manœuvring they managed to get away from the wharf unobserved, and by dint of selecting shady streets and dingy side-turnings, they reached Nelson-square practically unnoticed. Most of the household had retired to bed when they arrived, and, bidding the man follow him and make no more noise than necessary, for fear of rousing the unsuspecting Mrs. Jinkle, Ranger let himself in with his latch-key and made his way up to his rooms, with the other in close proximity behind him.

Once in, with the door safely bolted behind him, Ranger set to work, and soon had the dying embers of his fire stirred into a genial blaze, and a heterogeneous collection of creature comforts spread out on the table. Bidding his strangely encountered companion fall to—a bidding which he had no reason to repeat—he himself proceeded to change his clothes and further to fortify against the possible ill-effects of his long immersion.

Half-an-hour later he considered that he was satisfied and reasonably safe, and as the man had also finished his meal and was then furtively regarding him from under a pair of very shaggy and unkempt eyebrows,

he suggested a move in the direction of the fire, which was now blazing and spluttering in an enticing manner to men who had just experienced the cold of a midnight plunge in running water. Filling himself a pipe, he settled down and signified his readiness to hear a little in the way of explanation from the sorry figure of the man before him, whose appearance indicated all too plainly that he could not hold his own in life, and, as the events of the past few hours showed, was not even able to accomplish his own end in a peaceful and satisfactory manner.

It was a common story that Gerald Ranger listened to that evening—so common that it is not worth the repeating. It concerned a man who, fifteen years before, had been one of the most brilliant writers on the Press, who, it was whispered, was down in rotation to



the editorial chair of the great *Thunderer* itself. It began in drink, continued with drink, and would have ended with the plunge off Waterloo steps had not beneficent Providence, in the shape of Gerald Ranger, interfered and stopped the last drama in a life wilfully and woefully squandered.

Strangely enough, it was Gerald Ranger himself who did most of the talking. The true journalistic instinct rises superior even to a fifteen years' course of whisky soddening, and while Ranger knew just as much of his companion's history as that individual chose to allow, his own story was soon gathered up and pieced together by the sorry representation of outcast humanity in the chair opposite him, whose scope of observation, inquiry, and thought, in appearance, was limited to the spirit-decanter on the table.

"A quarter to three," observed Ranger at length, with a slight yawn. "Now look here, my friend! I have dragged you out of the river, and by rights I suppose I should have handed you over to the police, and have rendered you a service by doing so. In return for my silence, is it too much to ask that you won't make another such attempt? No,"—as the other was about to speak—"just hear me out. There is enough of you left to be worth the saving, I venture to think. You are under an obligation to me for your life, and as I do not particularly care about being weighted with such obligations I want you to redeem it by a promise to leave that cursed stuff alone for the future. You have already had more than the life-time supply of three men, which is greedy; you are in the gutter by it, which must be confoundedly uncomfortable; and you are ruined in health, position, and prospects by a few pounds' worth of whisky, which is cheap and foolish. A man of your capacity should at least have stood out for better terms than those which would be dear at the

price for the lowest scum of manhood that ever starved in London. I have given you life and liberty, and I will go one step farther and give you a fresh start on those terms. If you won't have them, why, I can only hand you over to the nearest policeman and rid myself of the whole business. How say you?"

CHAPTER VI.

WHICH CONCERNS A BROKEN PROMISE.



THREE months later, and despite Mrs. Jinkle's very pointed comments, Ranger's rooms were still accommodating the strangely-consorted pair. Three months is a long time for an habitual drunkard to refrain from his poison; but, to Ranger's absolute knowledge, not a drain of spirit had the other touched. It was with something of the nature of a shock, therefore, that he arrived home one evening and found Mrs. Jinkle in tears and wrath, the room looking as though it had been invaded by a buffalo; his whisky-decanter emptied and broken, and the object of his solicitude gone.

Bitterly disappointed and angry, he pacified his landlady with a heartfelt assurance that never again would he be guilty of the unspeakable folly of intruding "one of them beastly drunken wretches" on her hospitality, and proceeded to restore a semblance of order and decency to his dismantled apartments. He required no explanation; the matter was all too plain. A short, half-hearted struggle against temptation, a nip, perhaps by way of compromise, a steady carouse, and the devil had come into possession of his own again; and his promising pupil, staggering downstairs and frightening even Mrs. Jinkle, who was comparatively

used to such scenes, out of her wits, had eventually rolled off, lost beyond redemption.

A bulky package on his writing-table suddenly drew Ranger's attention from his domestic duties. Investigation showed that it was manuscript, and a brief note scrawled across a sheet of foolscap elucidated the mystery of its presence.

"I have done my best [the note ran], and failed. Think not, though, that I am insensible to your kindness. And that the obligation may not altogether be on one side, an outcast's legacy I leave you to do what you will with; it belonged to me in happier days, and there is the value of good stuff in it. To me it means more whisky; to you, probably, success. Therefore take it and use it, and in the days that are to come perhaps it may induce you to spare a thought to the man you would have rescued, had rescue been possible."

That was all. No signature, no indication of his intentions for the future, nothing beyond these bare words, which must have been penned even while the purpose to abandon himself wholly to his wretched slavery was determined in his mind.

Ranger never met the man again. Worthless, degraded creatures such as he, are not easy to trace in the labyrinths of our great city; and in all probability the river or the casual ward took him from the life he had disgraced and degraded to make the best account he could of his sorry stewardship.

But his legacy lived, and is living yet in cheap editions and pirated reprints.

More than a fortnight elapsed before Ranger troubled himself to look into the papers that had been bequeathed to him; but when he did commence to examine them, the temptation came to him and he fell. Story after story he passed through his hands of such excellent merit that he knew instinctively there was not a publisher in London who would have refused them.

The first, second, third, and fourth appeared anonymously in first-class magazines and weeklies, and the cheques for their value were made payable to "Gerald Ranger, Esq." All this while his conscience was clear. The stories were his property, and it was only just that he should receive their monetary value. A well-meaning friend did for him what he would never have ventured to do for himself, and going one step further, gave Ranger the credit as well as the cash, and assured his future for him at the cost of his morality.

This friend was editing a popular monthly at the time, and when Gerald took one of the stories to him he was only too glad to get it, and to serve his trust and his friend at the same moment.

"But why on earth don't you sign it, man?" he queried again, as the final proofs were handed to him by the diffident author. He had urged the point repeatedly ever since Ranger had identified himself to him with the writer of the clever stories that had set the literary circles throughout the kingdom agog with speculation and admiration. "It will give you a name that will admit any twaddle you care to pen in the time to come."

Gerald had refused and gone away slightly huffed

at the other's persistence in a matter which, dearly as he would have liked to do it, held his hands tied from public recognition.

The friend, being a friend, had thereupon dubbed him "a stupid young ass, blind to his own interests," and had scrawled "By Gerald Ranger" under the title and sent it to the press before reflection could cool his purpose.

There it stood when the magazine came out, and Ranger, being in the swim, stifled his conscience and went with the tide, which carried him far and pleasantly out of Blackfriars-road into Kensington, and brought him within sight of his one great purpose, which was bound up in a slight, girlish figure in a black dress and, it must be confessed, shabby boots and shabbier gloves, who governessed the children of a country clergyman, and longed wistfully for the time when Gerald and she could share any fate so that they shared it together.

Even while the guilty triumph he was experiencing over the success of his last venture and the congratulations of his friends, Maggie, his love, was journeying to him from the wilds of Hampshire.

She was flushed and excited, and when they met she greeted him constrainedly. His joy in her presence was dampened at the outset, and when she produced a well-thumbed copy of the magazine containing the story—*his* story—and laying one shapely finger upon it as it lay open on the table between them, looked at him steadfastly and reproachfully, he felt as one who has gone behind a friend and been detected.

"Gerald," she said, and she said it softly and with pathos, "you did not write that story. Why does it bear your name?"

"But, Maggie," he stammered, "I—er— that is—why, what do you mean?"

"You did not write that story, Gerald."

There was insistence this time, but the insistence of pathetic entreaty and a world of prayerful yearning that he would not lie to her, was expressed in her face.



He did not lie. He told the truth to her, even as I have told it to you, wondering the while that she, of all persons save one, could know of his falsity in claiming what was not justly his due. And then he begged her, as she valued their future happiness, to hold her peace. His claim on the stories was good, he urged, and only to the author who had given them was he accountable. To the author would he render his just due, he said, should he ever appear and claim it.

Merciful heavens! What was she saying? Ranger bent lower, and lifting her eyes to his, Maggie repeated her words.

"*She*, Gerald dear, not *he*; and she will never claim it—never! She gives it to you, who have the best

right to it. And, oh! I am so glad! If you had attempted to deceive me, if—if——”

A slight, hysterical laugh that was half a sob choked her utterance.

“But——” he began.

“Certainly, dear,” she rejoined, translating his thoughts, and growing strong and self-reliant again now that the danger was passed. “I wrote those stories. There were twelve or sixteen of them; I am not sure how many. I wrote them soon after poor father died—while I was looking for a place—thinking perhaps that I might find my vocation in it, and help you to help me. You would have helped me if you could, wouldn’t you, Gerald?”

“Yes, of course, I know. Well, I wrote them out in my loneliness and sorrow, and I sent them to a literary agent who used to advertise in the papers. I never heard anything more of them or him, until this week I found this one printed here under your signature. I thought they were useless, and felt too miserable to make any inquiries as to their fate; and then Mrs. Leighton engaged me, and I forgot all about them. I should not know even now if I hadn’t seen your name, and, of course, I was compelled to read anything that *you* wrote.”

Ranger doesn’t think very highly of the outcast’s gratitude now, but he thinks a great deal of his wife, I am told.

CHAPTER VII.

WHICH IS SHORT.



REMEMBER that story is copy-right, you fellows," said Murdoch, suddenly opening his eyes and standing up to stretch himself. "I might want to use it myself."

We promised to respect his rights, and broke up. I, for my part, was eager to get home and transcribe some shorthand notes that I had been making. Alas! for journalistic morality. As well ask a drunkard to forego his drink, a miser his gold, or a Jew money-lender his percentage as to ask a journalist to "keep off" a story.

I am not all bad. I told Murdoch what I had done the very next time I met him. He laughed a little, but seemed somewhat concerned all the same.

"I am sorry for that," he said, simply, "because it might cause the wife anxiety. Yes"—seeing that I was looking expectantly at him—"that man's name wasn't Ranger, and the facts are—facts."

"And his real name is——" I suggested, insinuatingly.

"Alfred Mur——"

No! I am not so bad as all that, and journalistic morality is not all dead.

Industry and Sloth:

THEIR STRUGGLE AND THEIR FALL.

"There's nothing more ghastly in the world than poverty in London."—KIPLING.

And the man who can steer straight through it when he knows an easy and crooked path out of it is a hero or an ass, "accordin' to individooal fancy."—R. A.

CHAPTER I.



ONCE upon a time, and not so very long ago either, Industry and Sloth went into partnership together in a garret in Stamford-street, which is Blackfriars way. They were getting quite prosperous then, and felt they could safely afford themselves the luxury. Prior to the time of which I am writing, they had been in a condition to describe themselves as of "no settled abode," for Industry, Thomas Augustus Crane by name, was a poet, and Sloth, generally known as George, was a journalist out of work, and the annual incomes of both worked out at about the same figure. But it happened that Industry had the good fortune to get a sonnet taken by a magazine editor, who, being under the influence of the tender passion at the time, was

appealed to by the sentiments expressed, and not only accepted it, but paid for it. The amount thus realised was only a pound, it is true; but by an extraordinary run of good luck Sloth, at the same date, met a man he knew, and managed, with much perseverance, to raise another five pounds on the strength of the acquaintanceship. Now, five and one make six, and that figure in pounds represents a good and useful sum to begin housekeeping with, if the ideas are not too magnificent, and the tastes and habits are simple and few.

They were old hands at roughing it these two, and adversity had cast them into many strange places; but they went together everywhere and shared quarters always, whether these were under Waterloo-bridge or in the fourpenny "doss house," alike with the first-floor front in Bedford-square, and the third-floor back in Blackfriars. Just then they wanted something quiet and unostentatious, and they sought it and found it in Stamford-street, S.E. Thither they bent their steps at the close of the day on which their good luck had come to them.

"We'd better not go in together, old chap," Sloth remarked when they arrived at a quiet-looking house with a card in the window stating that apartments for single gentlemen were to be had within. "You stop outside while I arrange terms, or the old frump will be wanting to charge us so much each. I'll take the room, and you'll be a friend who comes to see me. It will come cheaper that way."

It's wonderful how 'cute one becomes when money

is scarce and the necessity of contriving to make it cover as much ground as possible is ever present.

Industry walked over to a pawnbroker's shop in the vicinity, and promptly lost himself in an "Ode to Adversity," while apparently studying the contents of the window with that earnestness of purpose usually adopted in order to make the public at large believe that you are on the eve of speculating in some trifling forty-guinea article of jewellery, when, as matter of fact, you are only waiting for a clear field to slip in unobserved and leave your watch—not to be mended.

Meanwhile George interviewed the landlady, and, with a winning smile, observed casually that he was stopping in town for a little while, and, not caring about the noise and bustle of hotels, had come to her in the confidence of being provided with comfortable and quiet apartments.

"Step hin, sir," said the landlady, evidently impressed by George's manner, and visibly flattered by the compliment to her house and management.

"There's the first-floor front just hempty as it 'appens. This way, sir; mind the stairs, sir." So saying, the worthy dame obsequiously ushered George into a tawdry-looking apartment, and paused, with an air of modest pride, to allow the spectacle of its magnificence to sink well into his mind."

"My dear madam," said George—George was always polite to landladies, he had such a respect for their business capacity—"This is almost more than I required. It reminds me of the rooms at the bigger hotels, and

I had something more simple in view ; but what are the terms?"

"Fifteen shillings a week, sir, with hattendance," replied the landlady, almost delirious with pride and hope. "The last gentleman paid a pound, not but what it's worth it ; but seeing as you've taken a fancy to the room, why, we'll say fifteen shillings."

Would she though! There were two voices in that matter, and when the interview closed the landlady didn't think nearly so much of George as she had at the outset. A man who came into the house and demanded to see the best room she had, and another at ten shillings per week on the next floor, and refusing both, elected to take the garret on the third at a paltry five and no attendance, was hardly a fit subject for respect. In

fact, she thought he was a fraud, and when a Stamford-street landlady thinks a thing she generally says it. Mrs. Jorkins did in this case, and when she had done so, she called over the banisters : "Jane! you Jane! come and show this person the third-



floor back, and mind, it's two weeks' rent in advance with no references." Thus instructing, she retired to her own regions below, and left "Jane"—a typical lodging-house slavey—to show George to the

garret, and to stipulate for the two weeks' rent in advance.

George wasn't inclined to be particular—which was as well seeing that there was plenty to be particular over, had he been so minded—and closing with the terms, was once more in possession of a home, even though that home was a garret. After all, what dwelling could there be more suitable for Sloth to occupy? It is true that Industry was going shares in it, and that Sloth had contributed by far the greater part of the capital which was to pay for it; but things do get awry now and again in this world of ours, and besides, Industry's share had been wrought for and earned, while Sloth's contribution was levied, or borrowed which means the same thing though sounding better. Then, when George had received his latch-key, along with a general idea as to his rights and privileges, and had heard the footsteps of the maid die gradually away, lost in the cavernous depths below, he went out and fetched his companion, and once more, for the thirtieth or fortieth time, Sloth and Industry went to housekeeping together.

Now it happened that Industry was sensitive and proud, and his lofty soul disdained to bargain for bloaters and such commodities with the humble and useful keepers of the stalls in the "Cut." Being poetical, he was not, and could not be expected to be, practical, and if left to himself he would have spent the available twopence on the more pretentious, if less satisfying, bath-bun. Sloth, on the contrary, had no pride, and was, above all things, practical, and, after

one experience of sending Industry out shopping for the twain with their last sixpence, and receiving back three stale buns done up in a dainty paper bag, he used strong language and thenceforth did the shopping himself, while Industry stopped at home and attended to the fire, and the washing-up, and bedmaking, and other odd jobs of a domestic nature that it was their privilege and pleasure to do for themselves.

In this case George went out with twopence and unlimited audacity, and returned with three bloaters—he worked the man down from a penny each on the strength of a cash transaction—a miscellaneous parcel of groceries (on trust), two loaves of bread (trust likewise), and a small boy bearing a half-hundred of coals, which the owner thought were going to be paid for, and which George had a strong suspicion were not.

Then they prepared themselves a meal, and while discussing it they reviewed the situation and their hopes and prospects for the future. Six pounds would not last for ever, and the vital point just then was how they were to continue the struggle when it gave out.

“Don’t you think something might be done with your relatives?” George queried.

Crane had relatives, and wealthy ones, too; but their purses were tightly closed against him, partly owing to a family dissension, and partly from a strong disapproval of his calling. The more religious ones looked upon a poet as something not exactly wicked, but dubious—to be classed with theatres, and dancing, and such-like vanities. The practical ones regarded the species as loafers, and hinted pretty plainly that if he

wanted a living he could work for it the same as they had done and were doing.

George possessed no relatives at all that he was aware of, and the majority of such friends as he had were not in a position, even had they been minded, to assist him. But, as he sometimes argued to Crane, there was not much difference in the long run between having rich relatives who wouldn't help you and friends who couldn't.

Crane shook his head, and toyed with the fish on his plate.

"You might persuade them to part with a little by the aid of a life-preserver," he said. "That's a risky method, but it's the only one, and you'd have to strike extra hard if they thought the money would be applied to my use and assistance."

"Um!" mused George. "There are other methods of extracting besides that, which is clumsy and unsportsman-like at the best. The old proverb says that you may lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make it drink; and yet I fancy a veterinary surgeon, with a little scientific pressure about the gullet, would speedily upset that trite little fact in natural history, and I believe——"

George left his sentence unfinished, and continued his meal; but, later on in the evening, when the things were cleared off the table, and he was lolling over the bed with his pipe and an old newspaper, he remarked, "I'll tell you what it is, Crane. If we don't strike oil before this windfall gives out somebody will have to part, and as likely as not it will be your

swell relatives. And," he concluded, significantly. "I fancy I know a dodge for gathering in their shekels beside which the bludgeon won't stand a look-in."

Crane was absorbed in an "ode" and made no response save an impatient shrug implying that the divine afflatus was not helped to any great extent by this intrusion of sordid and worldly matters. It was characteristic of Crane to be miles



deep in composition, with his paper in front of him and his ink and pen at hand. That is why he figures here as Industry.

It was equally characteristic of George to improve the shining hour with a pipe and a book, and abstruse calculations and plottings to rouse a good healthy breeze in the way of financial winds some time in



the near future. Precisely for that reason he stands in these pages for all time as Sloth.

For the next three weeks or so no change in their worldly prospects took place. Industry worked off "odes," and "sonnets," and miscellaneous verse, along with many little prose articles. These he took round to the different magazines and journals himself during the day so as to save postage. But they invariably came home to roost like the birds of ill plumage, and by reason of paying for what couldn't be got without and where trust was dead, the original hoard was fast fading into the nothingness of the unobtainable. Sloth loafed about, and smoked, and read, and spent much time and thought over the situation ; but smoking and reading are not immediately productive of wealth, and his contribution towards the general expenses at the end of the three weeks equalled that of Industry.

Then came a fitful gleam of hope in the shape of a cheque for a couple of guineas in payment for an essay from the pen of the ever-plodding Crane, and after that deep, dark, hopeless gloom settled on the pair. Crane, at any rate, broke down in utter despair. He had worked so hard, and had been so hopeful, and this was the result of his toil ! They were down to the last half-sovereign then, and when that was gone there were the dreaded days—to be spent in lounging about the City—and the more dreadful nights, to be passed somehow in the parks or on the embankment—to be faced again. When would it all end, and where ? And George sat and smoked and smoked in vicious, vengeful silence, and waited for the time to mature when he could put into practice a scheme that he had evolved with infinite trouble and patience just at those

moments when he seemed to be wholly immersed in his pipe and stale literature.

One night they sat together, he, as usual, with his legs sprawled comfortably across the hearthrug, and his pipe on and in full working order, and Crane half-heartedly piecing together in poetic form the outlines of a tragedy of hunger, desperation, and suicide, that had obtained a four-and-a-half line notice in the evening papers.

"Industry, like virtue, is its own reward, eh, old man?" George grunted at length, rousing himself and looking at his friend. "A noble reward, too, when you come to think of it. Forty shillings is an encouraging sum to work seven weeks—seven days a week, and sixteen hours a day—for. I who have done nothing for the same length of time but sleep and eat and smoke, am just that amount the poorer. Yes! it's a fine thing is industry; but all the same, I think you've done sufficient. It's time that Sloth took off its coat, and rolled up its sleeves, and waded in now. I am going to take your place at the ink-pot, though I don't think I shall work so continuously as you have done; but if it isn't more remunerative, then I intend to start afresh as a costermonger. Now, old boy, you turn out and let me come there. Tell me exactly what I want to know, and let me do as I choose, and we'll be living in clover for many months to come."

Curious but complaisant, Crane vacated the chair, and George took it, and prepared for action. His first move didn't suggest any great amount of exertion. He simply refilled his pipe, and stuck his hands in his

pockets, and bade Crane make out a list of his wealthier relatives, with their addresses, and any peculiar points in their characters. This Crane did, silent and wondering; and when he had done, he pushed it across to George, and waited for his next move. George took it, and scanned it; but vouchsafed no explanation. Instead, he took up the pen, looked out some paper and envelopes, rapidly composed three letters, sealed and addressed them, and, throwing them on to the table, remarked, with a grin, "There! 'The Polite Art of Tapping Relatives; or, Jeffries' Improved System of Blackmailing.' I think that ought to bring us relief. In the slightly-altered words of the Kipling, 'we'll be looking for the postman in the morning.' Meanwhile, I'll slip out and drop these in the post; and mind, you're not to do another stroke until the results of my exploit are made known! I can't go letting you make yourself ill, old chap," he concluded, affectionately. "Good people are scarce nowadays. And, besides, I know this will turn up trumps. Let me see! I've been working about half-an-hour, and I calculate the payment to be twenty-five pounds. You have worked for seven weeks for two; so I think the advantage rests with Sloth this journey."

"Perhaps so," retorted Crane, sceptically. "But I've had my bird in the hand, or rather in my pocket, you must remember, and yours is still in a very inaccessible bush. In fact, to continue the metaphor, if your bird—oof-bird—flutters in the bush of my estimable relatives' coffers your chances of ever snaring it are remote."

"Maybe," replied George, with a grin. "Maybe; but we'll see."

"By the way," he suddenly remarked, as they were getting into bed that night, "are your relatives of a loving disposition? Exchange visits—keep up a correspondence—compare notes—and all that sort of thing?"

"I don't think so," replied Crane. "I don't know much about them, but I fancy there is very little love existing between them. They're not of affectionate dispositions at any time, and there's a family lawsuit over my late uncle's money hanging round."

"Uml that's satisfactory, then," rejoined George. "Commend me to a family lawsuit to sow dissension and strain the ties of blood relationship. Here's my best wishes to it, for it covers the only weak spot in my little undertaking. Good-night, old man! We'll fare sumptuously to-morrow."

In the morning the postman came, but he brought nothing for the expectant twain away up under the roof of Mrs. Jorkins's hospitable dwelling.

George made a grimace when this fact became apparent.

"It'll be bloaters again for breakfast this morning, old man," he said. "How I am getting to loathe that nutritious dainty, to be sure. But it'll be steak and kidney to-morrow, or I'm a Dutchman. After all, it *is* rather soon to expect the remittance yet."

The day went on and brought nothing with it, so that they had to content themselves with the remainder of the same toothsome relish for dinner. Just before

tea-time, George got restless, and after walking round and round the room like a caged hyena, he suddenly demanded the amount of their resources of Crane, who generally acted as treasurer. Four and three-pence halfpenny was the sum, and George, taking it, sallied out and invested nearly the whole amount in foodstuff and drinkables, and a fresh supply of tobacco.

Crane groaned at this extravagance; but George was as lively as a cricket, and, philosophically observing that if the worst came to the worst there was always the workhouse to fall back upon, turned his attention to toasting some slices of bacon over the fire. After tea—the most satisfactory meal they had had for months past in spite of the precariousness of their position—they lit their pipes and prepared to enjoy the evening. But barely had the smoke impregnated the atmosphere of their one small room when Jane tapped at the door, and announcing, “For Mister Crane, please, and there’s tuppence to pay,” thrust into George’s hand two rejected manuscripts and a letter. Crane gave the girl the money, and sighed dismally over the despised offspring of his brain; but his sighing was sunk in astonishment and alarm at the action of George who had unceremoniously torn open the letter and was then dancing round and round the room in the fifth stage of lunacy.

“It’s come, Tommy! it’s come!” he yelled. “It’s an almighty tenner, and it’s come at last. No more bloaters—no more sneaking round the alleys to dodge the baker and the butcher—no more going short with baccy! It’s a solid little slab off the lean end of the

neck of mammon, and by-and-by we'll have a whole rib all to ourselves and be happy ever afterwards. Sing Tommy! dance and sing and be grateful, for it's come."

Later on, when the first excitement had worn off a bit, George returned to his chair and his pipe, and gave Crane further particulars.

"It's a ten-pound note, and it's from your Uncle James," he said, with a chuckle. "He doesn't send any love with it; but he expresses hopes for your hereafter that imply grave doubts as to your ultimate destination. I am afraid he regards you as a hopelessly abandoned youth, Tommy; but he's stumped up for all that, and that *ought* to comfort you for his bad opinion, if it doesn't."

"Uncle James sent me ten pounds, George? Nonsense!" said Crane, incredulously.

"Pretty substantial nonsense at any rate," remarked George, tossing the note across the table. "Here! take care of it. It's nonsense with a negotiable value, and we'll cash it in the morning along with the others. There's two more to come—another tenner and a fiver."

Sure enough the evening's post brought the five pounds, in spite of Crane's scepticism, and the first thing the following morning, the ten pounds arrived, and George's prediction was verified, and his ruse a complete success.

That day they delighted the heart of Mrs. Jorkins by moving down into her best room, and although the wily George beat her down to twelve-and-sixpence

weekly in the matter of rental, and stipulated for one or two things in the matter of appointments and attendance over and above what usually accompanied the suite comprised in the first-floor front, she was sufficiently elated to confide to Jane that she "always said as 'ow that gentleman was one of the real sort, 'e 'ad such a haristocratic hair with 'im."

A few days later, he opened his heart, under the persistent entreaties of Crane—who regarded the liberality of his relatives as little short of a miracle, and wondered at it accordingly—and gave his friend the recipe by which he had so improved their circumstances.

"Mind you, old chap," he said, "I don't advocate it, and would much sooner have worked for the money, although I am such a lazy beggar; but as an alternative to Mrs Jorkins's third-floor back, and a perpetual diet of bloaters it merits my full approbation. You see I just applied my journalistic talents and a keen knowledge of the world generally as regards that most miserable of all miserable objects 'the poor relation,' and evolved a remunerative little system of absence.

"To the maternal lessee of the two pretty cousins you are always raving over, I wrote something after this style:

DEAR AUNT, — After this long silence you will be glad to hear that I intend running down to see you for a few weeks. Fortune hasn't been very kind to me, and I am afraid my appearance is not altogether creditable; but of course that won't make any difference in your eyes. If I only had a little capital at my back to tide over the harder places with, I think I should do very well. This gives me an idea. I believe Conny has a few hundreds of her own,

and he used to be very fond of me. What is to prevent us making a match of it—always with your permission, of course—and then with means at my back I shall be able to wrest from the world both fame and wealth.—Ever affectionately, your nephew, &c., &c.

P.S.—If I had a few pounds—say five—at command, I might be able to stay on here and make a fight of it; but I haven't, and therefore expect me in the near future—next week probably.

That fetched her," remarked George, with a grin. "The very notion of having a scapegrace nephew tampering with the tender affections of her younger daughter was a sure clinch. She sent the five pounds to enable you to continue the struggle, and a curt intimation that, with other views for her daughter's future, she much preferred your absence. Strike her deeper next time.

"The tenner from your Uncle Zedekiah was extracted by a casual reference to a late six weeks' experience of prison, and a general desire to reform, with an expressed intention of removing to his neighbourhood out of temptation, to give the reforming influence a fair chance under the shelter of the avuncular wing. There was also a slight mention of a ten-pound reformation that could be effected up here in London.

"He valued your absence at that figure, and sent the amount to keep you off. Uncle James braced up under the influence of the following:—

Dear Uncle,—I recognise at last that as a poet I am a dead failure. Your judgment was correct when you predicted that I should do myself no good by following this unfortunate bent of mine. However, it's never too late to mend, and I now intend to give it up, and to try costermongering Bob Bashem—a man I met in the casual ward lately—has kindly offered to go into partnership with me and show me the rig, and we are intending to start

in your town. Bob thinks with your standing in the place, we shall be sure to be patronised by all the swells and do better there than anywhere.

Bob is going to lodge with a friend of his, Bill Blinkey—he sweeps the crossing opposite your office, so I expect you know him—but, of course, I shall come and stop with you. Give my love to aunt and the boys. Harold is still at Oxford, I suppose; but I expect little Jimmy will just enjoy riding round on the barrow.—Your dutiful nephew.

N.B.—I almost forgot to say there is a round out Clapham way, I could get for ten pounds. But I haven't got ten pounds.

“Fancy the great hardware merchant digesting that, and the mental spectacle of his sister's son hobnobbing with crossing-sweepers and casual-ward loafers, and trundling a coster's barrow round to the houses of all his swell acquaintances,” remarked the graceless George, with a chuckle. “I wonder he didn't have a fit. However, he much preferred you at Clapham, and sent the necessary purchase-money along with a few observations which I will not hurt you by repeating.”



THOMAS A. CRANE.

CHAPTER II.



RANE was silent and thoughtful.

In fact, though glad enough at the release from the pressure of grinding poverty and its necessary sordid surroundings and accompaniments, he was not over-pleased at the position in which he had been thrust by his friend. To be made to figure as a failure was bad enough in itself to one of his sensitive and poetic nature; but to be placed so low in the eyes of those with whom want of success was almost worse than crime itself, and poverty a subject for scorn and contempt, was rather more than he could bear with equanimity.



"Well?" queried George at length, after waiting a reasonable time for some sort of comment upon the situation.

"I don't like it, George," Crane replied, rousing himself. "You meant well, and I cannot feel angry at what I know you have done more for me than for yourself; but all the same, I do not like it."

"And why?" persisted George.

"Because—because," stammered Crane, with a flush, "it's begging."

"You'll excuse me, old man; but that's just precisely what it is not," George replied. "To beg, I take it, you must make either directly or under cover of some specious pretext or other. a demand or a request for money, and if you can indicate a line or a word conveying any such request in the letters I wrote I will undertake to eat 'em first, and then take the money back personally, and explain the whole affair to the people who sent it with humble and ample apologies added thereto."

"Well, perhaps there was not: indeed I know there was not." Crane admitted half reluctantly. "But the general principle was the same, and in the long run it amounted to nothing short of begging."

"Oh, hang your general principles!" George retorted; "the only 'general principles' involved in the affair are those contained in the beastly snobbishness of your relatives. You don't look upon that money as an expression of sympathy with you in your misfortunes, I suppose? Don't think it was sent under a kindly and generous impulse, to help you a little in the battle of life which, they might suppose, is going rather against you?"

"No! hardly that. Certainly not that," replied Crane.

"Most certainly not that," went on George. "You might starve and welcome in any hole in the United Kingdom for all they would care, or you might live

in degradation or vice wheresoever you chose, for all that it would trouble them, so that you did it outside their locality; but when in health and strength, and poverty and rags, you deliberately propose to haunt their neighbourhood, and to claim them as your relatives, and put them to shame on your account before the faces of their noble friends and swell acquaintances; then, lo and behold! the tune changes, and they are eager to keep you away—in this case by the means considerably shown to them—by the gift of money that would not have been forthcoming to save you from starvation or gaol. Is that so?"

"Yes," Crane admitted; "I believe it is. In fact, I know it is, because I have asked over and over again for a paltry loan, and have been as often refused, with the addition of the most unwarranted charges and gratuitous insults."

"Quite so," George responded. "Now, having got so far, we will consider the morality of the transaction. A—we'll class your relative as 'A' for the sake of convenience—resides in a section of the kingdom where he has built himself a comfortable abode, and has surrounded himself with friends and acquaintances, and is, in that quarter, above all things respectable. B—a shabby, though withal an honest, most plodding, and thoroughly deserving individual—roams at large around this charmed circle, until he is seized with a fancy to go inside. 'B' then writes to 'A' and says: 'I have roamed far and wide, and now I think I will travel a little in your direction, just to see what it is like after all these years. Being a connection of yours, and having

tolerably clean hands, naturally enough I shall look you up.' A' writes back, frantic and furious, and says, 'You shan't!' 'B' replies, 'I shall and will! England is a free country, and I am at liberty to travel where I please. You are not "preserving" the part wherein you reside, I presume.' 'A' writes again: 'Oh, my virtue!' he says; 'oh, my respectability! Why, your trousers are torn, your linen, what there is of it, is soiled, and your hat hasn't been brushed for weeks! Boo hoo! do travel in some other direction, there's a good fellow, and I will enclose a trifle towards the travelling expenses.' And now," concluded George, solemnly, "seeing that 'A' is anxious to rent his own particular quarter, and so to preserve it against the the intrusion of 'B', does 'B' do anything peculiarly immoral in accepting the rental for that particular spot and exploring other localities instead?"

"No, not in the light in which you have placed it, certainly," replied Crane, laughing heartily at his friend's practical view of the situation. "'A' is undoubtedly receiving a privilege, and nowadays privileges have to be paid for like most other things. But even then he is toadying to a very contemptible phase of character which is sadly prevalent in this age of snobbishness."

"Maybe," said George; "but beggars mustn't be choosers, my friend. The majority of us have to toady in one way or another, and those who have the most grace and aptitude in the art get on the best. It is an accomplishment that is learnt and practised by all classes—from princes to pork-butchers. Even the wretched, half-starved, and wholly abandoned criminal

in the dock laughs heartily at the witticisms of his lordship who is trying him, in the hope of obtaining thereby something off his impending sentence, and as often as not receives an extra year or so for misplaced levity—while doctors, lawyers, and even clergymen pander to the weaknesses and foibles of their clients for their own particular purposes. You've got to do it, Tommy, my boy, or go to the wall, and many a worthy fellow, to my knowledge, has been pushed aside on this very account to make room for those whose moral backbones were constructed of more pliable material.

“And now, having disposed of the morality more or less successfully, I will consider the transaction as regards its justice. Dear Uncles Zedekiah and James, and equally dear Aunt Hannah, are relatives of yours, more or less affectionate, and there is some consideration due to them on this account. If it isn't enough to instance the fact of their having sent any money at all to estimate the exact quantity, I will repeat a little story which you told me one night, to beguile the passing hours, when the airy and bony couch on Blackfriars Bridge failed somehow or other to attract the drowsy god. Perhaps it wasn't respectable enough for him to visit; or, maybe, he was willing, but the absence of any sort of food during the daytime rendered his efforts on our behalf futile. Any way, we couldn't sleep; so, instead, you gave me a brief outline of your career, while I put on my pipe and endeavoured to recollect, by the aid of its familiar touch, what the taste of burning Virginia was like. Do you remember that night?”

"Yes, old man, I remember," said Crane, quietly. "And I also recollect how you insisted on my having your overcoat, owing, you said, to an uncomfortable closeness about the night, though it was certainly not observable to anyone else, myself amongst the number, for if ever I felt drawn in sympathy to the inhabitants of polar regions, I did so then. Yes! go on."

"Once upon a time, then," resumed George, "a certain young lady married a clever and energetic, though not particularly prosperous, young ironmaster. Her family were disgusted, and outraged, and all that sort of thing; but seeing that they couldn't help themselves in the matter, they bore it stoically, with the aid of such assistance as black looks, cold words, and colder neglect could lend them. This she might have contrived to bear up against; but an unusual depression in trade ultimately ruined her husband's business, and forced him to take a situation that miraculously opened for him in the works of her eldest brother. Owing to this, she was constrained to see them, and mix with them, and to eat the bread of her brother James's charity—her brother James told her it was taken from his charity stock, and brother Zedekiah confirmed the statement, as did sister Hannah, notwithstanding the fact that her husband worked twelve hours a day on a high stool in brother James's office, to help cover the cost of it—until this charity food of their providing proved too much for her, and she sank and died, leaving her husband and a boy of three to finish out the meal between them. Strange enough, the fare proved as unpalatable to the husband as it had to the wife, and

having nothing very much left to live for now that his wife was gone, he generously waived any further claim to the family charity loaf, and vacated at once his high stool and his interest in things of this earth. Before he did so, however, he had so bolstered up the none too stable firm of iron manufacturers, of which Uncle James was the sole existing proprietor, that it became an exceedingly flourishing and wealthy affair. He was a clever man in his way, and could invent material-saving processes and improve on productions for other people, where he could not work for himself, being weak, and dreamy, and witless, as clever, brainey men very often are. He could create wealth for his employer, and build him up an eminence of respectability to stand upon, and he could send Harold to Oxford and Horace into the army; but he could do nothing for himself or his own son. He was only a clerk, not a partner, and when he died it was still the same loaf of charity that fed the youngster thus left to his uncle's care.

"Well, uncle fed him, and clothed him, and educated him cheaply, but fairly well, and then surpassed himself in his benevolence by offering the boy the same stool in his office that his father had occupied.

"The boy took it, and worked on it, for many years, for little in return save short pay and hard words; but the iron trade had small charm for him, and after a fair trial he came to believe that he had something better than clerking in his nature if it could only be given a fair chance. He had cultivated poetry in his leisure moments, and, considering his age and surroundings, had been more than ordinarily

successful with it. He was getting old enough to assert himself then, and he mentioned modestly, though firmly, his distaste for his present occupation, and the bent that he would follow if he could. He couldn't! Uncle James didn't approve of it. As a clerk he saved money and did good work, and Uncle James was not the sort of man to ignore such considerations as those. For the first and last time there was a disagreement, and about the same time that Harold went to Oxford Thomas came to London, turned from the house that had been the only home he could remember, to succeed by his own exertions, if success were possible, or to fall by them if not—a warning and an object-lesson to all wilful youths who will persist in having their own way despite the wishes and commands of parents and guardians.

“Well, he didn't succeed to any great extent, and once or twice he came perilously near to starvation. He wrote to his uncle and appealed for help; but he would have done better to expend the postage on rolls, because rolls would have been more satisfactory and less mortifying to the feelings than the replies he received. The great man could only receive him back into the office on condition of his abandoning every idea of a career outside that of the counting-house. Who was he, indeed, to aspire to anything greater than that—the beggarly son of a beggarly father, who had no business to be in the family at all? If they wanted a representative of literature and letters in the family, was there not Harold at Oxford, or Horace in the army? It is true that both young men were not

particularly studious, and were more than a trifle vicious; but then they were respectability itself, and had little need and less intention to soil their hands with labour of any description. Let them take to literature, if they would. They would ornament it and do credit to it. They might even lend it something of their own respectability. But a clerk-poet! A man who wrote out invoices to pretend to write sonnets! Bah! They might as soon expect to hear of a prince who played cards or betted on horse-racing for money, or of a duke who brewed beer or let cabs for hire!

"The young man was wickedly proud and uppish, and shockingly obstinate, and he refused to be a clerk, and he insisted on being a poet—and that's about all there is of the story up to the present."

"I am sorry you have resuscitated it, old man," observed Crane; "but all the same it is true, and the whole of Uncle James's money was made by the inventions and contrivances of my father. However, two wrongs don't make a right, and shady treatment on one side doesn't justify shady transactions on the other. Besides, you don't make allowance for my uncle's genuine dislike to literature as a profession, and indeed you must admit that it has its drawbacks."

"Quite true, old man, it has," replied George. "In answer to your first remark, you will please to remember that I distinctly refused to advocate the stratagem I practised, which was only done as an alternative to a confoundedly uncomfortable situation. In the second place, whatever your uncle's likes or dislikes may be, he is a mean, dirty, snobbish rascal for all his respect-

ability, and the others are tarred with the same brush. He and they are willing to pay a price to keep a shabby, discreditable nephew at a distance, moved thereto by motives that are as paltry as any that could actuate a human being. The question now is, do we accept the price or do we refuse it for the sake of reserving to ourselves the exquisite privilege of travelling in a direction in which, in all probability, neither of us ever will have the remotest desire to travel?"

Crane hesitated, wavered, and stumbled.

"I think we accept it, George," he said, at length, and the fall was complete.

With the fall came prosperity as a matter of course, and what Crane could never have accomplished in the days of his integrity, he managed to do easily when he agreed to become a passive partner in George's wile for keeping a regular equinoctial pecuniary gale blowing. Freed from the worries and cares that accompany an uncertainty regarding financial matters, and the consequent pressing necessity to grind out—not "odes" and "sonnets," and poetic effusions generally, but bread-and-cheese, and board, and raiment, and coals, and such-like vulgar, sordid commodities, he put his heart into his work and produced things worthy of the undoubted talent he possessed. This was satisfactory though it wasn't altogether profitable, for editors couldn't afford to pay for poetry, and the publishers would have none of it, and if it hadn't been for Sloth and his ever-ready resource to augment the exchequer their condition would have

been as bad then as it was in the days when they inhabited Mrs. Jorkins's third-floor back.

George was an older man than his friend, and with his long experience in journalistic matters he was able to discern promise of great things in Crane's work if it could only be brought into publicity. He was as slothful as ever; but he did a great amount of thinking over his pipe and the magazines and books that superseded the stale literature of former days. An idea was maturing in his brain in much the same way that he had matured the last profitable nursling, and he only waited time and opportunity and a spur to put it into practice.

Meanwhile they worked the "absence from home" racket systematically, so as to make each victim's turn come round about once every half-year. The income was ample and steady, and when the machinery got rusty, as machinery will do now and again, they betook themselves in company to the faulty district, and—hiring an old coster's barrow and other paraphernalia—lubricated it speedily and so effectively that they could safely rely upon its working easily and well for some time to come.

"I say, old man," George remarked one evening, "this is rather a stupid sort of existence, don't you think? I mean objectless when I say stupid; but it seems to me that we both might do something to better ourselves, while we have a steady income to fall back upon."

"I can't very well do more than I am doing," Crane replied. "Unless I abandon my work alto-

gether, and try something more thankful—and I am loth to do that, or I might have gone back to Uncle James in the first place—it seems to me that when I have written I have carried my purpose as far as I can. I can't *make* the publishers take my poems."

"No," said George, with a sly grin; "but there's nothing that I know of to prevent you publishing them yourself."

"Except, perhaps, that I'm not a publisher," observed Crane.

"But you can be, or *we* can be," retorted George. "Why not? We've got the money, I've got a good insight into the actual business, and a fair stock of constitutional laziness, without which no publishing office can be considered complete, and to crown all, you have a thorough knowledge of office routine that will serve us capitally in the commercial part of the concern. Why not, eh?"

"Really, George, I don't know. Yes! Certainly; why not?" said Crane, and thereto fell to excited visions of his own little effusions, dressed in dainty coverings, and in all the splendours of broad margins, beautiful type, and terribly expensive paper, sent forth far into the world like the dove from the ark, to try for their master whether a resting-place for his genius was to be found.

George thought of this, too, and rejoiced for his friend's sake. But he saw further, and grinned with a horribly sordid and mercenary grin as he recalled a few of the tricks of the trade, and reckoned up, like the Jew of fiction, the cent-per-cent, prospect

that opened before him. It is terrible to note how quickly the downward path is traced when once a start is made, and the success of his first venture into shady actions was bearing fruit not altogether in proportion to the size and importance of the plant.

The idea mooted and approved of, it didn't take George long to get it into working order. A couple of rooms were obtained in a thoroughfare leading out of the Strand, and the doors of both were duly inscribed, in the whitest of white paint, with all the artifices of the signwriter's craft,

JEFFRIES AND CRANE, <i>PUBLISHERS.</i>

One of the doors was labelled "Office," for the benefit of the expectant and inquiring client, while the other was marked "Private," as indeed it might be, seeing that it acted as sitting-room and bedroom and every and any sort of room that the firm required for their private use and convenience. A brass plate in the doorway downstairs, with directions concerning the floor and number of the rooms in which the firm of Jeffries and Crane transacted their business, gave additional ease in locating their premises, and smoothed out the topographical difficulties of the visitor as easily and smoothly as a crib does the dense and lazy schoolboy's when threading the mazy pathway to the classics, a better simile than which I cannot hope to hit upon.

Thus did Sloth and Industry become publishers, and

the fact they duly notified in the daily papers by means of advertisement. The public at large were informed that any and every description of publishing was undertaken by them, and that estimates were free. Authors were respectfully invited to send their manuscripts to Messrs. Jeffries and Crane, who would have them read and reported upon, and, if suitable, would undertake to bring them out. A slight fee—half-a-crown—was charged for this reading and reporting, for, of course, the firm couldn't be expected to wade through all sorts and conditions of handwriting solely for the benefit of their healths. Then, if the manuscript was not considered suitable, the author was notified to that effect, and considerably informed that Messrs. Jeffries and Crane would be at the trouble of returning it on receipt of the necessary postage.

Singularly enough, there was very little amongst the enormous quantity of manuscripts received that was not suitable for publication. It may be that the pressure of business prevented the firm from giving the careful consideration to each manuscript that was no doubt required; for how on earth, seeing that they had no assistance, they were able to read through the manuscripts at all, is more than I can make out. I only know, such was the state of the market, that four men devoting their whole time to it could not have conscientiously waded through the mass and have kept pace with it. But Jeffries and Crane evidently did so, or how else could they have told whether it was suitable for publication or not? And yet George was more slothful than ever, and Crane, when he wasn't

eating or sleeping or walking, was engaged either in replying to letters received in the way of business, or in giving poetic expression to his thoughts and feelings. Singular; but so it was!

Well, having duly considered the matter, and brought their professional experience to bear upon it, the delighted and often surprised author was notified that his book had found favour in the eyes of Messrs. Jeffries and Crane, publishers, and that they were prepared to bring it out on a system by which the author made a payment towards the cost of production and took, say, three-fourths on the sales. Sometimes, and frequently, too, the author agreed to these terms—for money is plentiful in some quarters, and fools abound all the world over—and the book duly made its appearance. The author and his or her friends were pleased, the critic tore his hair, or congratulated himself on the fact that the work “really wasn’t so bad,” the public knew little and cared less about the transaction, and Messrs. Jeffries and Crane swelled their banking account and waxed almost, if not quite, as respectable as Uncles James and Zedekiah and Aunt Hannah, away off in the Midlands.

“Let me see, old man,” said George, one evening—I record this conversation, for it is instructive—“how do we stand with Miss Youngbud’s novel?”

“I hardly know yet,” Crane replied. “But her cheque for her share of the cost of the production was seventy pounds. I don’t think the printing and binding amounted to over forty-five, so that after the advertising has been paid for we shall clear about

twenty pounds, besides the sales, which are certain to run up to a couple of hundred copies."

"Um, not bad," remarked George. "I say, Tommy, do you remember one night when we slept on Blackfriars Bridge and hungered for a crust? I do, and it seems like a vision now. We were not respectable then, Tommy; we were poor, and poverty is never respectable, Tommy. We *are* respectable now, because we are rich and flourishing business men. Why, Uncle James himself writes that he shall be pleased to see you when he is in London, and that if a few thousand pounds can be of any assistance you are more than welcome to them. Funny, isn't it, Tommy, that they wouldn't let me earn a pound a week and be respectable when I so yearned for a pound a week, and hankered after respectability above all things."

* * *

"But," I fancy I hear some one remark, "it's bare-faced robbery. Where are the police?"

"Nonsense, my unsophisticated friend," I reply. "That's not robbery, it's business. You might as well call the Stock Exchange gambling."

There are many Jeffries and Cranes in this small country of ours, and in most other countries, too, I believe, even in America. Sometimes they are publishers, sometimes they are lawyers, or bankers, or building-society directors, or patent-medicine proprietors; but they are Jeffries and Cranes for all that, and their business is—business; not swindling, but business.

* * *

There is a moral to this story: but I am afraid it

is so complicated that I shall not know how to draw it. However, I will try.

Firstly.—Avoid snobbishness. Remember that everything has its marketable value in this world, even personal absence; and if this fact should come to be recognised in certain quarters, the virtue of industry might droop and fade, and sloth flourish correspondingly. There is such a pleasure in hard, unremunerative, and unappreciated toil that this would be a pity.

Secondly.—It is not advisable to allow a young man to discover that there is more profit in almost anything than there is in honest work. He might, in the innocence of his nature, fancy that the rogue's game was the best.

And lastly.—If you are an author and have a book to be published, don't take it to Messrs. Jeffries and Crane.

Myrtle Farm:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble
 strife,
I'll spend my existence, with [a modest
income, a farm and the accompanying
zoology, and last—not least—] my wife.
GRAY UP TO DATE.

CHAPTER I.

MY GOOD FORTUNE.



My name is Smith—Thomas Henry Smith. I am thirty years old; have lived nearly all my life in a London suburb, and my wife's name is Martha: which information introduces me as much as I expect is necessary, with the exception that I wear spectacles.

I had reached home one evening very early, and, in company with Martha and the cat, I sat placidly smoking in my arm-chair, and idly musing over things generally, when the postman's arrival disturbed the serenity of the scene. Jane, our one small domestic, brought in a black-bordered envelope, and from the

date of its arrival the whole tenor of my existence was altered.

“Good gracious, Martha!” I exclaimed, after perusing its contents. “Poor old Uncle Thomas is dead.”

My wife made a sympathetic remark and then we both mused silently. The Uncle Thomas whose decease was here notified was a younger brother of my father’s. He was a crochety old man; but he was genuinely fond of me, and from my earliest days a visit to him was appreciated and looked forward to. He owned some little property in the wild and mountainous county of ——, and practised amateur farming there on a small scale. I had been named after him, and it was pretty generally understood that the bulk of his possessions would descend to me when he should have ceased to require them, and now that time had come. With this knowledge, then, it is small wonder that Martha and I gave ourselves up to reflections of a pleasant sort. My life up to then had been much as other men’s lives are who occupy unimportant positions in City offices, and lead painfully monotonous existences between their places of business and their private suburban retreats; with a break of three weeks or less—seldom more—during the summer months, when they retire to some sea-side resort with their families, and lounge about on the sands in company with a newspaper and a pipe.

Although destined to inherit his property after his decease, it was little beyond good advice and sage maxims that I had had from the old gentleman since leaving school. In my juvenile days half-a-crown was

religiously presented to me when I paid a duty call, and, after leaving scholastic institutions, he exerted himself to obtain me my present situation with an old friend of his in the City, where work was exceedingly plentiful and wages meagre in proportion.

But now all was altered, and late into the night Martha and I sat and discussed our good fortune, and made enthusiastic arrangements for our future existence.

Martha, like myself, had passed her life within easy reach of the Bank of England, and we both knew about as much of country life as we did of navigation or soldiering, and that wasn't much. But we were both imbued with the idea that it was just the sort of life we should like. Probably had we been more intimate with the details of such an existence we should not have been so much in love with the prospect.

We both imagined it to be a sort of primitive state of living, like that of the early settlers in the colonies. An existence where you dressed in rude, picturesque attire, and killed a sheep or pig for your food, and cultivated your own garden produce, or went without, and ate damper. I don't know what "damper" is exactly, but I imagine it to be some sort of flour and water concoction, "bready" in nature, and much in vogue with Australian backwoodsmen and such-like people. We sat and conjured up pictures of what we would do, and revelled in the prospect until the clock warned me that however free and unfettered I might live in the future, yet Messrs. Blake and Screwem would expect my due attendance on their mundane affairs at precisely the same time in the morning as

though nothing had occurred, and I moved a resolution in the direction of bed which was unanimously carried.

In the morning I imparted the news of my good luck to my envious fellow-clerks, and received their congratulations. I invited them all to come and see me whenever they liked, and arranged a farewell spread at a neighbouring restaurant to celebrate my emancipation. Messrs. Blake and Screwem expressed themselves sorry at losing my services when I announced my good fortune to them, which was gratifying—at least, I took it so. You see everything through such rosy spectacles under circumstances like mine, and what would cause you displeasure or rouse your ire at any other time only soothes you and puts you in an amiable and friendly frame of mind then.

Both I and Martha attended the funeral of my unfortunate uncle, and the subsequent reading of the will. It was all as we had anticipated, and with the exception of a few legacies to be paid, the whole of his property and cash became mine. There were several legal and social matters to be attended to; but I managed to survive them.

It would be silly, I reflected, for me to attempt single-handed the work that would confront me at my new abode; and casting round for a suitable assistant I thought I couldn't possibly do better than persuade my brother-in-law—a good-looking young fellow, singularly energetic, overbearingly conceited in most matters, with a persistent habit of smacking me on the back and calling me "Smith, my boy"—to come with us and stay for a month or two. He didn't

want pressing; but promised to join us as soon as he could make the necessary preparation.

It was just about a month after the receipt of that fateful letter that we—Martha and I, with Jane the domestic; Tom, Martha's cat; Jock, my terrier, and Pip, our canary—were fairly installed at Myrtle Farm, and ready to begin our ideal existence away from the rush and scramble of the money-grubbing herd; the turmoil and strife that abounds in large towns where the prevailing creed is "each for himself," and the finer feelings and thoughts of mankind are lost sight of in the greed of gold and worldly ambition. Here in this charming sylvan retreat would we pass the rest of our lives in tranquil enjoyment amidst the surrounding hills—the wretched cabman charged me five shillings for driving us two miles over them from the station—and observe nature in all her varying aspects.

Martha made a stupid remark while we were in the cab. She said she was sorry the house was so far from the station.

"It will be so awkward," she said, "when we want to run up to a theatre."

I remember I was descanting on our fortune in being able to leave the sin-stained metropolis so far behind us, and the remark struck me as untimely, and I said so. I reminded her of Lot's wife, and how she had looked back, and her terrible fate.

She said she didn't see the connection. "If I had thought we were going to be buried alive down here," she said, "and never go to a theatre. I wouldn't have come."

I didn't answer her then, for, to tell the truth, I couldn't think exactly what to say, and besides I thought that when my misguided wife came to really know the joys and charms of a country existence all such unhealthy longings would leave her, so, instead, I meekly followed her up the path to the house wherein we anticipated passing the remainder of our existence.

It was a good substantial brick residence was my bit of house property, not large by any manner of means, but snug and compact, and in our eyes, at least, all that could be desired in the way of a house. After we had lived in it for a week or two we began to think that a few little additions would be acceptable, and in the course of time we came to the conclusion that it was lacking in nearly everything that ordinary civilised persons consider necessary to life; but more of that anon.

It was dark when we arrived, except for the light caused by the blaze of a fire we had had lit in the room we had selected for our living-room, and Martha asked me to light the gas. It is curious to note the effects of use. It was customary with us in London to light the gas when artificial light was required, and here I expected to do the same. Accordingly, I struck a match and looked round; but I didn't light the gas, principally because there wasn't any gas to light. Then I remembered where we were, and laughed. Martha said it was all very well, but what were we to do.

"We can't feel our way round in the dark," she

said. "We've no lamps, and I don't suppose we shall be able to get any without sending to London for them."

I suggested that we might make use of candles for a time until the lamps arrived, and, calling Jane, despatched her on a forage for candles. She was gone an hour, and then returned with two old-fashioned dips. She had bought the shopman out, she said, in the matter of illuminants, and she had been afraid to come back down the dark lane by herself, and had waited until the obliging shopman had been able to send his boy with her, to scare off anything objectionable she might meet on her homeward journey. Jane took one of the dips to the kitchen with her, and we consumed our frugal meal by the light of the other. We sat about talking until it—the dip, not the meal—showed signs of burning out, and then cleared off to bed at the comparatively early hour of nine, filled with earnest thoughts of what there was to be done on the morrow, and the pleasing consciousness that we were fairly started on our new life.

I awoke with curious sensations in the morning. There was a twittering set-out outside the window, and a combination of farm-yard sounds that pleasantly reminded me of my new possessions.

"There," I thought "that's my cow saluting the rising sun, and my pigs and chickens and duck joining in the chorus? I got up—I was too excited and restless to stay there any longer—and dressed myself, and when I got downstairs found that it wanted still a quarter of an hour to five. Leaving the rest of the

inmates peacefully sleeping, I whistled Jock from his kennel and left the house in his company for a ramble round my property. I was conscious that my attire was not exactly that of a *bonâ-fide* farmer; but I thought being so early it didn't matter, and I could dress more in accordance with my occupation after breakfast. I had on a pair of light trousers, check pattern, a flannel shirt, loose reefer coat, a cricket cap and shoes, and a light cane, and thus equipped I lit my pipe and wandered across to the cow-shed. I don't know if you have ever noticed the patronising way a cow will look you up and down, as though mentally taking your measure. I hadn't until my own indulged in a like proceeding. She had got her head over the door and there was a very thoughtful expression on her face as she stood there chewing the cud.

"Good gracious," she seemed to say, as she caught sight of me and stopped ruminating. "Whatever's this?"

It may be my fancy, but I thought a quizzical smile crossed her face, and there certainly seemed to me to be an impudent leer in the way she watched me up and down as I stood there, and asked her how she did, and addressed her as Molly, which is the correct name for cows, I believe. It didn't anger me, although I felt rather uncomfortable under the scrutiny. After all the poor beast couldn't possibly know that I was her master, and I expect she wasn't used to a "get up" like mine. "It will be different," I said to myself, "when I get my working things on and confront her."

She returned to her chewing, and I and Jock went and inspected the piggery.

We didn't want any finger-post to find that piggery, it was so obtrusive. It yelled to us, so to speak, from the uttermost ends of the farm, and my first impression on seeing it was that I would submit it and its inhabitants to a thorough wash as soon as possible. There were two pigs. Great fat unwieldy brutes they were, lying in the midst of the filth, and snoring away in sublime bliss and contentment. They opened one eye and grunted when I poked them with my cane; but I couldn't prevail on them to wake up and move themselves. "Oh, blow you!" they seemed to say. "What do you want fooling round here at this unseemly hour? Go home and go to bed, and come back at breakfast-time with a bucket of nice hot mash, and we may possibly be able to notice your existence."

The duck was more lively, and was swimming round the ornamental water—about ten yards in diameter, and green—and hunting the early worm with commendable activity. I decided that she should have company as soon as I could procure some duck's eggs. It is not good for duck to be alone, and I reflected that, as soon as we had made a meal of that one, we should be duckless, a not-to-be-heard-of state on a farm of any pretensions whatever.

This finished the inspection of the zoological portion of my property, and I betook myself to the agricultural department.

A tolerably large field, quite uncultivated, with the land round about the house, comprised the extent of

my possessions in landed estate, and I felt proud and happy as I surveyed it, and made innumerable plans for alterations and improvements to be carried out in the near future. I had got down to the extreme end of the farm and was consulting my watch, for certain internal remonstrances were beginning to call up lively recollections of breakfast, when Jock made a dead-set at the hedge dividing my property from my neighbour's, and commenced barking furiously. At the same time an oldish gentleman straightened up his back and looked over at his would-be assailant and nodded a friendly 'Good morning' to me.



"Morning," he said. "'Tain't often we see young chaps like you out at this hour. Old farmers like me has to be. See, I've hoed this patch this morning, and shall do as much more by breakfast. My name is Slimmer, and I've lived here man and boy for forty years. My father did before me, and his father too. I suppose you're a friend of the new chap what old Smith left his money to, ain't you?"

I said I was acquainted with that individual.

"Ah! a soft sort of chap I expect," he continued.

“He’ll come down fresh from the counter with wonderful ideas of farming, and reckon he’s going to make a fortune out of his place. They all do, and then when they have lost the best part of their money they throw up the whole affair and go back to their high stools. The old chap was a rum old file, though he was good-hearted, and maybe the young ’un will take after him. What sort of fellow is he? Wear a rig-out like yours and get up at ten in the morning, and have men to do the work he ought to do himself I reckon will be about his size. My word, though,” the old chap chuckled, “he’ll have something to do if he intends to go in for the business thoroughly. The place ain’t had much attention at the best of times, although it is so small, and lately it has regular run to seed.”

Here he started enumerating a few of the things that he reckoned the “new chap” would have to do, until I began to despair. Farming seemed to take on a more important and momentous aspect than I had thought possible, and at last I told Mr. Slimmer that I was the “new chap,” Mr. Smith, and begged him to let me call upon him for any practical advice and assistance I should want. I told him that I was not stocked with original theories concerning farming, and in point of fact knew absolutely nothing about it. He wasn’t backward in imparting his advice in response to my appeal. He climbed through the hedge there and then, and in his company I made the second inspection of my property, while he pointed out what ought to be done or undone to bring the place up to a proper standard.

By this time I was hungry beyond endurance and, reflecting that Martha would be sure to be up by now, I cut short his descantations as to healthy and unhealthy pig-sties, and invited him to come and have breakfast with me.

"Now, Smith," I said to myself, "this worthy gentleman is a neighbour of yours. He knows, or seems to know, everything connected with practical farming, while you know positively nothing. Therefore, oh Smith, cultivate the worthy Slimmer, make a friend of him, and perchance you and your farm may thrive."

And, besides, I was hungry, and so I asked him to breakfast. It was just after seven when we reached the house; but all was as quiet as when I left it a couple of hours before, and I felt chagrined as I noticed the smile on Slimmer's face when he grasped the situation.

"Never mind," he said. "You come and have breakfast with me. *My* people will be up, I'll warrant."

I was too hungry to stand on my dignity just then, and I accepted his offer with positive thankfulness, for it was wonderful the appetite I had worked up in those two hours out in the open air. My new friend introduced me to Mrs. Slimmer, a portly old lady with a broad smiling face, and his daughter, a pretty, well-behaved girl of nineteen.

I did justice to that breakfast. At first I felt ashamed of my huge appetite, and more than once had nearly apologised on its behalf when I happened to notice Slimmer's feats in the eating and drinking line. Immediately I took heart of grace, and reflecting that my

modest performance would be unnoticed by those accustomed to witness such meals made, I ate away to my heart's content and felt well satisfied with myself thereafter.

After asking the ladies to call round and make the acquaintance of Mrs. Smith, Slimmer and I once more sallied out, and I imbibed more knowledge concerning farming matters, and had practical illustrations from his own well-managed place. Then we parted, he to go and attend to some particular operation, and I to return to my own property, and to try and put into practice some of the many theories that I had picked up.

CHAPTER II.

COUNTRY LIFE.



WHEN I got back I found Martha was up and the breakfast ready. I wasn't very keen about it; but I managed to toy with a chop and some coffee while I imparted a full and precise account of our nearest neighbours to her. There was a great deal to be done, however, and it would not do to sit about all day. Martha and Jane went down to the village to see about several things required, and to telegraph to London for a set of lamps to be sent down by the afternoon train and make us independent of the gas we had become so accustomed to rely upon. Martha has another and worse grievance than the absence of gas, and that is water. Our whole supply is contained in a well outside the kitchen door and has to be drawn up in a wooden bucket affair by means of a chain and windlass.

According to Martha, as far as I am able to make out her meaning, that well is going to accomplish the destruction of the whole of us, including Jock and the canary. Firstly, we are to be poisoned by its germs, and are to die, in various states of agony, from cholera, fevers, and other cheerful complaints, and be finally finished off by tumbling, one after the other, into its treacherous depths and so mysteriously disappearing

from the face of the earth, until some individual, from motives of curiosity, happens to pry into the well and discover the tragedy. It didn't matter that I pointed out to her how my late uncle and others before him had managed to live their allotted span in spite of its deadly presence, and she took no comfort from the fact that it was necessary to unbolt a solid wooden covering and lift a lid before it was possible to get at the water, and only a deliberate suicide could get into it. She grew more hopeful when I said I would have a pump put in, and the well bricked up. It didn't seem to strike her that the only difference would be in the manner of getting the water and not in the water itself, and I confidently reckoned that I had thus settled the two very important problems of light and water.

I watched Martha and Jane down the path and out of the gate, and then went and dressed myself in my working clothes. I hadn't paid much attention to Slimmer's outfit, and I felt sorry I hadn't. It would have been a sort of precedent. But I remembered that he had sneered at the clothes I was wearing, and I had my own ideas as to the nature of a practical farmer's general appearance. I put on a pair of old well-mended pants, a flannel shirt, a pair of old shoes tied up with string, and a battered old soft felt hat, and with a pail of hot water and a stiff broom I felt that I looked as disreputable a scarecrow as I could possibly construct to adorn my own field. However, there was no one to see me, and I made the best of my way towards the pig-sty, for the purpose of scouring that salubrious spot into a state of comparative sweetness. I had got

my spectacles on and likewise my pipe, and I was travelling slowly, for the water would persist in slopping over on my legs, and not being used to it my foot-gear kept breaking loose and going off on its own account. Barely had I travelled a dozen yards when the garden gate opened, and a clerical gentleman and three ladies with him walked towards me. There was a benevolent



smile on his face when he caught sight of me which might have been habitual; but the two young ladies with him tittered—decidedly tittered—while the elder lady, who was presumably their mother, put up her eye-glass, looked me over, and laughed outright.

“Confound them,” I muttered to myself, with a great want of charity I am afraid. “What on earth do they want. I thought that it *was* possible to be undisturbed in the country; but it seems that it isn’t. What shall I do, drop the pail and run for it, or face it out?”

I need not have troubled myself to decide this question. It was done for me.

“Good morning, my friend,” said his reverence, genially. “Is Mr. Smith in?”

“No,” I said, and with truth. “He *is* out.”

“Ah! indeed,” he replied. “Well that *is* a pity.

The man says his master is out, my dears," he remarked, turning to the ladies.

"Oh! yes, of course," in answer to a prompt by his wife. "Mrs. Smith, shall we find her up at the house?"

Feeling myself on firmer ground, I explained that Mrs. Smith was down the village on shopping business intent, and I hastened to add that it would be hours before she returned.

CHAPTER III.

AN EXCITING ADVENTURE.



MY clerical visitor and the ladies expressed their sorrow and, after leaving a message which I was "to be sure and deliver," turned their backs and retreated down the path, while with a sense of recovered freedom I picked up the pail, and at once began a desperate onslaught on the pig-sty. The pigs didn't seem to appreciate my operation, and failed to share my enthusiasm on the subject of cleanliness; but I considered that the cleansing of their unsavoury retreat was a duty that I owed alike to society and themselves, and refused to entertain their objections.

I had got one fat old porker pinned in the corner, and was scrubbing his ungainly sides with the broom, when he managed to free himself from the foot with which I was holding him passive and orderly under the operation, and making



a dive between my legs he precipitated me into

the pail of dirty water, and trotted indignantly and defiantly down to the garden gate, presumably in search of a situation where no such ridiculous ideas on the subject of ablution prevailed.

Picking myself up and wringing some of the water from my clothes, I started of necessity in pursuit of my sausages and streaky, and as I hadn't discarded my broom, but still grasped it as an object of offence or defence as the occasion required, there may have been some slight grounds for the stares of wonderment, and unseemly bursts of coarse laughter that greeted me from every person I encountered—which, judging roughly, I should say was about every inhabitant of that wretched little village, and a few hundred visitors besides. Six or seven good-natured though dirty and ragged little boys kindly offered their services, and streamed along in my company, hooting and yelling after my escaped porker. To do that pig justice he did scuttle for all he was worth, and would have probably reached his destination if a party of ladies and gentlemen had not suddenly appeared in view. Seeing this fresh obstacle in the path that led to liberty piggy hesitated, and he who hesitates, as is well known, is lost. By the time he had decided on his course of action I had him safely by the tail, that being the only likely handle that presented itself.

I pulled back my hardest, piggy pulled forward ditto—I wonder how his tail stood the strain—the little boys capered and yelled, and the party in front raised a simultaneous shout and then went off into independent shrieks of laughter. Having by this time

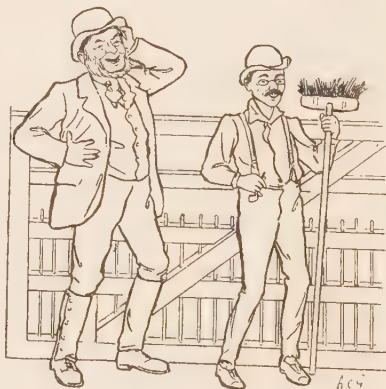
recovered my breath I surveyed my audience, and goodness!—I gasped faintly and relinquished my hold of the tail.

There, with a face showing annoyance, yet struggling with an uncontrollable laughter, stood Martha, while round her were the rector and his party, Mr., Mrs. and Miss Slimmer, a few other ladies with whom I was unacquainted, and our domestic, Jane.

“Hullo! Smith,” Slimmer greeted me with. “Running for the pig stakes?”

I muttered something in reply, and his remark let the clerical party into the secret of my identity. His reverence, in particular, seemed greatly amused, and he held his sides and roared until the cause of my discomfiture made another dash for freedom. Sagaciously judging that

one enemy with a broom was more to be feared than a party unprovided with weapons, and composed for the most part of ladies, the animal continued his mad career, and, safely dodging Slimmer, bore down upon and shot the



unfortunate cleric into as dirty a ditch as could well be found. That was the first time during the whole transaction that I had been able to see the humorous

side of the affair, and I laughed. In fact I roared, and Slimmer, leaning his broad back against a convenient gate, loosened his neck-tie and joined me in my mirth. We did enjoy that joke. We laughed in an ordinary commonplace manner over it for a few minutes, until the victim started making frantic though abortive attempts to scrape the worst of the dirt off with a pearl-handled pocket-knife, when we felt that to restrain ourselves would be difficult if not dangerous. So we prudently gave way, and leaning against that gate we shut our eyes and rolled about in our glee. By the time we had recovered neither the clergyman, his party, nor the pig were in sight, and wiping our eyes Slimmer and I returned to Myrtle Farm.

Slimmer seemed amused when, with some little natural pride, I explained my operations at the piggery to him. The sole remaining pig had improved the shining hour by drinking the water contained in the pail, and had eaten the half-bar of best mottled soap that I had provided to assist me in my labours. He—Slimmer, not the pig—insinuated that a few buckets of cold water thrown round generally and a diligent application of a stiff broom was all that was required to sweeten the condition of the pigs' residence and, he further explained, the inhabitants of those salubrious spots are not reckoned to require washing, and as a rule resent it.

Obvious moral—don't wash your pigs. It's casting pearls before swine.

This moral I assimilated and, with the comforting reflection that I was daily adding to my practical

knowledge of farm affairs, returned to the house with Slimmer for refreshments. I also had a desire to change my clothes. My get-up was all right, and tallied with my previous ideas of the sort of wild picturesque costume an Australian backwoodsman should appear in ; but then you see an Australian backwoodsman is not as a rule subject to visits from his resident clergyman and family—the female portion of it, that is.

“I will lay these things by,” I said to myself, “until I am an Australian backwoodsman. For the present, a cross between a cricketing suit and an ordinary afternoon costume seems to be the style of dress most suitable, although it is a long way from my preconceived notions of what the attire of a real genuine, *bonâ fide* amateur farmer should be.”

The rest of that day was taken up by friendly callers, and I felt thankful that I had changed my dress as party after party of the residents arrived to make our acquaintance. The men talked about farming and crops, and such-like things with me, and the ladies chatted about dress, and shops, and servants, with Martha. The story of the pig had, thanks to Slimmer’s strong sense of humour, travelled all round the community, and I had to put up with some considerable amount of chaff from the wags of the place. Even to this day some particularly funny man will occasionally stop me, outside the church on a Sunday, in the village, or even call me from some farming operation, and, with an air of one who is made happy by giving somebody something, impart the

information that So-and-So's soap is really an excellent preparation for pig's hide.

It is rather trying to have listen to stale jokes, especially when the jokes are directed against yourself; but it takes the country small boy to rouse every evil instinct in my nature. London small boys are a trial, and I used to think that they were the worst specimens of impudent humanity to be found anywhere. But when I contemplate specimens of the country small boy culled from our village, I feel that I owe his town brother an apology. The metropolitan youth is really polite and considerate by comparison. A few Sundays back I had left the church, and was standing talking with a party of the principal ladies and gentlemen who go to form our society, when two little urchins—who hadn't been to church, but, by convicting testimony of implements carried, had evidently been spending the day of rest by a wayside stream, angling for the gentle "tiddler"—passed by. They slowed up when they caught sight of me and, in tones that could be heard by every one within sight, the following conversation took place.

"Aw! aw! Billy Cox. See that chap standing there, 'im with the oi glasses," said urchin number one.

"Yaw," answered Billy Cox, laconically.

"'Im Oi 'elped chivy the old pig. Aw! aw! aw! 'e was a-washing of it with 'is missus's broom, an' it scooted down th' road an' upset our old parson into the ditch wot runs by old Styles's fa—arm."

"Garn!" was Billy Cox's comment on his friend's narrative.

"'E did, sure. You ask 'im if 'e didn't," was the reply.


"Did 'e, mister?" queried Mr. Cox of me, promptly taking the step advocated, and with no compunction about hurting the feelings of his informant by the doubt of his veracity implied by the question.

I was confused and annoyed at having the public attention thus drawn to me, and I reached for Mr. Cox and his friend with my stick somewhat viciously; but I only succeeded in hitting the doctor's wife's pet pug dog, to that lady's indignation, the pug's pain, and my own further discomfiture, while the two urchins retreated down the road laughing loudly, and the people within hearing chuckled with more subdued merriment over the joke.

I believe I forgot to mention that the pig turned up the following day in charge of the parish constable, who had impounded it for being found wandering without visible means of subsistence. Of course he soon learned to whom the animal belonged, and there was hope and expectancy written on his face, when he drove the defaulter up to my front door, which was justified by the shilling he sedately pocketed as he touched his hat and withdrew.

CHAPTER IV.

A RUSTIC COURTSHIP.

T is not to be supposed that all days were as the first, far from it. After the residents had paid their duty calls and satisfied their curiosity about us we were, with but a few casual visits, left to ourselves. And I am bound to admit, although not to Martha, that after a month or so I began to find country existence a trifle dull and slow. The neighbours were friendly ; but they were, about their own affairs and in their own way, a busy race with but little leisure to spend in gossiping. After a time, with much valuable advice and assistance from Slimmer, I began to get acclimatised, so to speak, and, as the habits and customs appertaining to my late existence faded away and became like a half-remembered dream, I settled down to the life of a small farmer, and found therein happiness and, to a certain extent, prosperity.

Edward—my brother-in-law—kept his word. He turned up a week after we had taken possession, and installed himself with us. Between us we have worked wonders on the estate. What I don't think of he does, and I must confess that some of his plans are boldly conceived and effective when carried out. Some-

times I wonder if he is not carrying things a little too far. His doings on one or two occasions seem to me to be rather of the nature of practical jokes; but he is stolid about them, and gravely argues their usefulness either from a practical or artistic point of view. For instance, he persuaded me to order down several pounds of different paints "to freshen up the place a bit," he said. I did this, and left him to carry out the execution of the work, for painting is not at all in my line.

Those paints lasted him for more than a week. He painted the cow-shed a vivid red and spelt "cows" across it in big white letters. The pig-sty he coloured a pea-green decorated with bright yellow spots, and so on throughout the length and breadth of the farm he bestowed with a liberal hand the contents of those paint-pots.

I had been able to add a few more acres to my landed estate. My cow-shed now sheltered three of those useful animals; the piggery had been extended to make room for another old porker, and a litter of juvenile pigs. The duck-pond always displayed a good and plentiful assortment of quack-quacks, in spite of the numerous calls they received to accompany sage-and-onions and other et-ceteras to our dinner-table. In addition to this evident prosperity, my original set of chickens had been multiplied by at least four, and took a fair share in relieving the ducks at their onerous duties. Altogether farming affairs were looking bright and cheerful with me, and I considered that I had reason to congratulate myself thereon.

I was becoming quite handy in doing things, too. When Jane reported that the kitchen chimney was foul and, in consequence, the range could not be persuaded to act properly, Martha consulted me, and we agreed that it must be swept. Accordingly Jane was despatched in search of one of those humble but necessary individuals who find a living by meeting such wants as we now experienced. She came back after a prolonged absence, and said she couldn't find a sweep.

"Can't find a sweep?" I said, when Martha told me this, on coming in to dinner. "What nonsense! I'll soon find one." But I didn't. I walked miles all round our village and those immediately adjoining until my feet ached, but nothing in the shape of a sweep could I discover. Then a bright idea seized me, and I turned my footsteps in the direction of Slimmer's.

He called to me as I was going up to the house, and walking across to the shed where he was standing, I found him viewing a quantity of lumpy-looking objects which he called "wuzzles," I expressed my admiration of these, and then artfully led the subject round to smoky chimneys.

"Well, why doant you sweep it?" he said, after I had explained our difficulty to him.

"What, myself?" I queried in surprise.

He laughed.

"I expect so," he replied, "unless you send to London for a sweep to come and do it for you. There ain't none here."

He initiated me into the mysteries of chimney-sweeping, and with renewed spirits I returned home.

Early the following morning I arrayed myself in a light costume, and one quite incapable of being spoilt, and proceeded to carry out the plan advocated and in use by Slimmer. I first obtained a quantity of rags, and tying them into a bundle attached them to the end of a long line stout enough to stand considerable strain, and mounted to the roof of my domicile. So far the advice was easy to follow. The idea was to let this bundle down the faulty flue and then drag it up again. The only trouble that presented itself when I got to the roof was in locating *the* chimney out of the half-dozen that presented themselves to my gaze. I selected the one that, as near as I could possibly judge, seemed to lead to the kitchen, and lowered my novel brush into its depths. I swept it thoroughly, and managed to dislodge an astonishing quantity of soot in the process; but when I got down Martha, who was patiently waiting in the kitchen for the broom to descend, said that it certainly hadn't come down in that room, and investigation showed that I had industriously swept the chimney belonging to our bedroom. Martha looked thoughtful when she discovered a few odd hundred-weights of soot spread about her furniture, and she made some remarks that implied a disbelief in amateur work generally, and mine in particular.

Then I mounted once more, and essayed the next flue. This time the breakfast-room suffered by my endeavours. After that, thinking that a few tons more or less of soot deposited about the house couldn't really make much difference, I swept them all systematically, and it's a strange fact, but the very last

chimney to undergo cleansing was the only one that I particularly wanted to find and clear. However, it was done now, and that was a very gratifying reflection. It only remained to get the soot out of the house and spread it as manure over my crops, and I could rest satisfied that we should not be troubled with smoky chimneys for some time to come.

The removal of the bulk of the soot was, by the aid of the spade and wheelbarrow, a comparatively easy affair; but it took a great deal of energetic use of the scrubbing-brush before the interior of Myrtle House lost its sombre hue, and was restored to its former pristine brightness.

Just about this time the conduct of my brother-in-law began to get peculiar. It seems that one afternoon a few weeks back he had undertaken to repair the fence between my land and Slimmer's, and while so engaged had made the acquaintance of the worthy Mr. Slimmer in much the same way as I had. Mr. Slimmer, on learning the relationship of my brother-in-law, had insisted on his going up to the house and having a cup of tea. As a matter of course, he had then been introduced to Miss Slimmer, and, judging by his frequent references to that young lady, Edward had evidently been favourably impressed. From that time forward he spent far more of his time at Slimmer's than he did with us, and it astonished us the number of urgently pressing duties calling him to their residence that cropped up. Martha told him that he might as well obtain lodgings there, and so save the time lost in tramping backwards and forwards.

He only laughed in a good-natured way, and strolled off "to see Slimmer." That was the amusing part of it. He was always "going to see Slimmer"; but I suppose it was accident that always contrived that Miss Slimmer should happen across his path and, no doubt much against his inclination, prevent him from going further in his quest of that lady's father. Of course, these meetings could have only one termination, and Edward and Miss Slimmer became engaged.

Love is said to have an unsmooth course; but in this case any rocks and boulders that might have caused a wreckage seemed to have been removed from their path by a kindly-disposed providence. Miss Slimmer was a jolly, open, kind-hearted English girl, and not a simpering little idiot, inclined to believe any yarn, no matter how tough, that an evil-disposed rival chose to pitch, and to either marry that rival, or to rush off and make herself and everybody connected with her—including the misunderstood, and maligned swain—miserable for a few years before matters got finally righted. This is what the ordinary heroine of the novelist should do, I know; but Edward's intended, perhaps owing to some constitutional defect, is not built that way, for which mercy Edward ought to be, and no doubt is, properly thankful. Edward himself, instead of rushing off to the wilds of Africa or America on receipt of an anonymous communication setting forth the falseness of his *fiancée*, is much more capable of hunting up the writer of the epistle, and banging him soundly for his pains. Such is the brutal nature of my brother-in-law.

Both the paternal and maternal Slimmer think a great deal of Edward, and under this combination of favourable circumstances we were not at all surprised when we heard that Edward and Miss Slimmer had arranged to become one, and that the details, even down to the date on which that important event was to take place, had been discussed and agreed upon.

It may be objected that I have been somewhat too concise over this matter. I think not. The story has been told so often that it lacks originality, and besides, as I before mentioned, these two contracting parties were so practical that they left no room for romance as understood by some young persons. They hadn't even the grace to have a few tiffs; but went through their days of courting in a quiet, ordinary, commonplace way that was almost disgusting. However, if not satisfied with my description, there is no possible objection to the reader filling in the details to suit himself or herself as the case may be.

Myrtle Farm progresses favourably. Under Slimmer's able tuition I have been encouraged to increase the extent of my landed estate, and the zoology has obligingly increased of its own accord. It is a pleasurable life, and, though slightly dull, is occasionally enlivened by a little excitement that lasts quite a long time, and goes a very long way indeed. For instance, my cow—the original cow—kicked me through the stable-door the other day, and I am still feeling strongly and sorely on the matter. And only a week or two ago my new bull-dog Demon, chivied me up a haystack,

and detained me there for four tedious hours before I could make any one hear me. At the expiration of that time Edward turned up and rescued me by the aid of a clothes-prop—he hit the dog with it, and persuaded him to go for a walk.

CHAPTER V.

WINTER MONTHS.



HERE was one thing I very soon found out for myself regarding farming. Like most other things, I discovered that it possesses two sides—a bright and a gloomy. It's mostly the bright side you read about in books. Glowing descriptive accounts they are, too, and you lean back in your chair, and smoke your pipe, and yearn to be a farmer. But after a little practical experience it is just possible that you may come to heartily wish yourself out of it. Not that I have been affected to that extent myself; but sometimes things really are vexing, and the glorious life of the gay agriculturist then leaves one or two things to be very much desired.

I feel it incumbent on me to tell you this. From the foregoing pages you may have imbibed erroneous impressions concerning amateur farm-life and I may yet be in time—I sincerely trust I am, to prevent those of you who own well-to-do Uncle Thomases from discarding your present vocations in a burst of enthusiasm, and trooping off to the country to be farmers, without due consideration and forethought. There are a few matters connected with the life that only practical experience can impart.

I have now passed through this experience, and after you have heard me to the end you will be better able to judge of the wisdom of taking such a step.

Winter seems to be a specially trying season. There are a lot of incidents of farm-life in winter that tend to render any ordinary human being brought up to a moderate degree of comfort discontented with his lot.

When the weather first began to set in cold I thought I rather enjoyed it than otherwise.

"Ah! this is something like," I would say to myself on turning out at my usual time in the morning. "Fine frosty morning, and everything so fresh and nice. Much better than those hot sweltering mornings which leave you no energy or strength to do anything more than loll about."

But after a week or two I began to feel that I had had enough winter for a start. I didn't want to overdo the thing and get a surfeit. Oblivious of my wishes, however, the winter still continued wintry—rather more so, in fact. Then the snow came, and what is worse, came to stay. And for three long weeks I was compelled to leave my warm bed at five-thirty each morning, dress myself in a room with the thermometer at some degrees below zero, and dig my way through two or three feet of snow to the sheds containing the farm stock, on purpose to supply their wants. Very often I was tempted to wish myself in the place of one of my own cows or pigs. They seemed very comfortable over it all, and certainly were allowed to use their own discrimination as to when

they arose, and were not expected to minister to any one's wants—not even their own.

One morning I had dug my way through an unusually deep fall of snow, and was pottering about looking after the creature comforts of the animals. The cow had evinced a strong tendency to cough during the week, and I was rather concerned about it. Martha said the poor thing had got its feet wet when I turned it out to make some little alterations to the shed and, although slightly sceptical, I wasn't sure enough about the matter to contradict her. Slimmer was away from home, and there was nobody I could appeal to. Besides, the cause didn't matter much seeing that the cow really had got a bad cough, and was evidently ailing.

The first time the cough manifested itself, I was holding a pail of water up for her to drink. She imbibed a good deep draught which half emptied the bucket, and then looked up in my face with such a piteous appealing expression that I felt certain something was wrong with her. Before I could express my sympathy she coughed. She didn't even turn her head away; but simply coughed. I didn't say what I was going to say then. I said something else, short and pithy, and went back to the house at a trot to dry myself, and change my clothes. Jane tittered when I entered the kitchen, and Martha asked me if I had been bathing. I scowled at Jane, and sent her out to the cow-shed to look for my spectacles, which had been washed away in the deluge, and told Martha my fears as to the soundness of the cow's chest. Martha

said she had heard the cough, and it hadn't sounded healthy to *her* mind. It reminded her of a fog-horn with a leak in it, she said. Then Jane came back, out of breath and excited. She informed us that she couldn't get the glasses "'cause the cow was a-sitting on 'em all of a heap like, and breathing awful."

With a woman's tender pity Martha immediately concocted an immense basin of hot gruel and took it out to the suffering animal who, with an intelligence for which I should never have given it credit, chuckled a hoarse sort of chuckle when the basin was placed before it, and planted her hoof squarely in the centre thereof, and was better for the nonce. But the cough returned, and the animal visibly declined, and waxed ribby. I took very good care to dodge the cough afterwards; but with that exception Martha and I did everything we could think of to relieve it. We used up whole sacks of oatmeal, and bathed its hoofs in hot water. Martha would have tallowed its nose, only the beast eat the candles as fast as she tried to apply them, and she had to desist for fear of making {it sick.



Then I tackled her—the cow, not Martha—with hot rum and butter, and the cow assisted my efforts nobly, and

drank it down by the gallon, until she got so frisky that she butted me clean through the stable-door with her head, and smiled an imbecilic happy smile at me over the ruins. Then we fed her up with baked spanish onions and, finding these had no effect, took her into the house, lit a big fire in the scullery, and rolling her up in blankets left her there for the night to see what results could be obtained from a thorough sweating. We had to discontinue this after the first night, because, besides improving the long night watches by eating her wraps, she coughed so distressingly all through the small hours that we couldn't sleep, and Jane said she would have to leave us if it continued. It put her so much in mind of her little brother who died with the whooping-cough, she said, that it made her home-sick.

Then I tackled our doctor on the subject. I met him coming out of church on the following Sunday, and we stopped to chat. We told each other what nice weather we were having, and how bracing and healthy the cold was, and then I artfully led the conversation round to the subject that was occupying my mind.

"Oh, doctor," I said, after we had discussed the health and general condition of every single individual in the parish; "supposing your cow had a very bad cough, what should you do with it?"

"Which?" he asked. "The cow or the cough?" Then he laughed, and all the other people standing round laughed too. For our doctor is a bit of a wag in his way, and is the wit of our village society.

"Either," I replied, "the cow or the cough, it doesn't


matter. I suppose if you cured the cough you would heal the cow, and if you healed the cow you would mend the cough. But what *would* you do?"

"Call in a vet," he answered, with an irritating grin. And that was all I could get out of him.

So I took his advice—it was the cheapest I had ever had from him—and consulted a veterinary surgeon. I expended a few odd coins of the realm in exchange for some bottles of villainous-looking black fluid, and after administering it, my cow began to mend and take on flesh again, and with a few more days' treatment the trouble left her, and she coughed no more.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME JOYS THEREOF.

HE next little misadventure I met with did more to discourage me than any I had as yet experienced, and the remembrance of it is still a sore point. I had gone through the usual performance of clearing the snow from the paths one extremely cold and foggy morning. I had laboured long and earnestly at some operation, I forget exactly what it was now; but I know that I had succeeded, by its aid, in imparting a genial warmth to my frame and, for the first time since I had risen, I had managed to get a little life into my feet. It was just about time to return to the house for breakfast when, in an evil hour, I noticed my ducks wandering round and round their firmly frozen pond, and alternately losing themselves and looming from out of the cold raw mist that covered the earth. They looked for all the world like the ghosts of some lost quack-quacks condemned to haunt the scene of their earthly joys, and I began to feel scared as I remembered how many inhabitants of the same pond I had assisted in making away with. By-and-by more practical feelings came to my aid, and in a burst of generous and kindly benevolence I walked across to the pond with the intention of breaking up the ice, and allowing them

to perform their matutinal ablutions. For this purpose I still retained my hold of a hoe which I had been using in the operations before mentioned, and with this I began a vigorous attack on the icy covering of the pond. No result followed the first blow or the second, and, getting irritated, I put good solid muscular strength into my third, and struck



again. A huge disc of ice gave way this time, and sank into the dirty depths of the pond. My hoe followed the ice, and I followed the hoe. Head and heels I went through the aperture, and struggled blindly, with my head stirring up the mud at the bottom of the pond and my feet sticking out of the hole and waving in the breeze for that birthright of every Englishman--freedom. I got it eventually, and a cold bath besides. My frantic struggles broke away the ice and allowed the rest of my anatomy to come in too, out of the cold, though hardly out of the wet.

I managed to land, and, without stopping then to do anything more for the benefit of the ducks, made a bee-line for home and bed. When I got to bed, circumstances obliged me to stop there, and after a ten days' course of it, during which I had ample

opportunities to reflect and make resolutions, I came to the conclusion that if my ducks really and truly did want to swim in ice-covered lakes, for the future they could thaw holes for themselves with their breath, or sit on it and hatch them, as far as I, personally, was concerned.

Some days after the event here recorded, I met Slimmer down the village. He hailed me in stentorian tones from a distance of a few hundred yards, and I went over to him for a chat. It was a week or two since I had seen him, and I wanted to get posted up in a few little things.

"Seen my geese?" he asked, after we had exchanged greetings and inquired after each other's family. "A round dozen of young'uns, fat as butter. Come and see them." He clutched hold of my arm, and together we strolled off in the direction of the Slimmer mansion, while he continued to expatiate on the merits of his recent purchases as we walked along. We went round the side of the house to the back, and there, with evident pride, Slimmer drew my attention to a dozen white fluffy affairs with amplitude of feet, and what wasn't feet was neck. I mentioned my impressions to Slimmer, who laughed.

"Yes," he said, "but wait until Christmastime. I fancy they'll astonish you if you see 'em then. Would you like to have one or two? They're no trouble, and a capital investment."

I thanked him, and set off home with four gay goslings in a basket, and my pride in my pocket. I turned them loose in a little pen by themselves and

left them to fatten and thrive against Christmas Day. Just then Martha called me frantically to come up to the house, and when I got there I found her studying one of those ominous yellow envelopes instituted to prevent a too happy state of existence, and add another burden to the shoulders of long suffering humanity.

"Whoever can it be from?" said Martha.

I didn't know ; but as the readiest method of finding out I tore open the telegram and read it I wasn't much wiser then.

"We're coming down—Bill," doesn't convey much even to an astute mind like mine. I told Martha it must be a practical joke or else a conundrum, and went back to my work.

It was dirty work that I was engaged in and my condition, not to put too fine a point upon it, was a trifle dirtier than my work. Edward, who was assisting me, was even more disreputable than I was. We were both rigged in dirty flannel shirts, old trousers with our braces tied round us, and dilapidated boots, and with backs sturdily bent and shovels in our hands we were clearing out the duck-pond preparatory to enlarging the same.

Edward persuaded me to this job. When I brought the goslings home, Edward duly admired them and then asked me what arrangements I was going to make for them in the way of aquatic sports.

"Why, put 'em in the duck-pond," I replied, in answer to his query.

"They'll wedge, if you do," he declared, emphatically. "It only holds a cup of water as it is, and

the ducks have to take it in turns to have a swim, so as not to crowd each other, and now you propose to cram those geese in as well!"

This statement was exaggerated; but there was an underlying stratum of truth in it, nevertheless, and I was concerned.

"Well, what are we to do?" I asked, helplessly; "it's the only pond we've got."

"Oh, that's all right, old boy," Edward replied, encouragingly. "Why not make it larger? Come on, let's go at it now."

So, as a preliminary, we arrayed ourselves, or rather, disarrayed ourselves as I before described, and, arming ourselves with shovels, started out. The cleansing of the old pond was a minor task: the enlargement was a serious business.

Edward has been reading up the Manchester Ship Canal lately, I fancy, and has been hankering for a job of this sort ever since. He started enthusiastically, and after he had done marking out and laying his plans, I shut my teeth firmly and grasped my shovel vigorously, for I saw that the task was one that would entail a considerable amount of energy and back-ache before it was through with. The pond, as it stood, was circular, and Edward proposed to dig another against it, and then to cut away the dividing bank, and thus make it oval. We dug, and dug, and dug, until my hands were blistered, and my back seemed to have taken on a chronic bend, and ached fearfully, and all there was to show for it was a lumpy, uneven pit, scarcely a yard square.

I wanted to leave it then, but Edward wouldn't hear of it. He said it was capital exercise, and "will do you no end of good, old boy—open your chest, and harden your muscles."

In the face of his example I didn't like to confess myself beaten, so I lubricated my smarting palms, and went at it again. We got along better when we had broken the frozen surface up a bit and began to get at the softer earth underneath. But even then it was terribly hard work, and although in the depth of winter, the perspiration was streaming off my face, and I felt like a parboiled lobster. We had accomplished about half the work when Edward suddenly ceased digging, and, looking up, said: "Hello, who's this?"

"Who's which?" I inquired, stopping also, and looking round, and there, with huge grins across their faces, stood the entire clerical staff of Messrs. Blake and Screwem, my erstwhile fellow-workers, and chiefest among them, and wearing the largest smile, was "Bill" Nodkins! Then I understood the purport of that telegram I had received a few hours previously.

It will be remembered that I had, on leaving London, invited my colleagues to visit me in my country retreat, and they had seized the first favourable fine and frosty office holiday to do so.

CHAPTER VII.

VISITORS FROM TOWN.



HELLO! Smith, old boy," they greeted me with, all rushing up and speaking together, and struggling to shake hands at the same time. "How are you, old man? Country life agree with you, eh?"

Then they chaffed. "Look at his weather-stained countenance, and his brawny arms," said Judson.

Judson is excessively tall and thin, and sets up for being an athlete. They use him to wind up the clock at the office by reason of his length—it saves them the trouble of getting a ladder.

"Yes, and his honest hard-working appearance," chimed in Nodkins. "And his clothes, too—a typical agriculturist, especially about the boots."

Nodkins is rising on forty years of age. He is very fat, and fond of his little joke.

In addition to these there were Arthur Ray and "Tilly" Jones—two junior clerks whom I used to hustle round in fine style when they were under my charge in days gone by; but very good fellows, and capital company. I introduced Edward to them, and we explained the nature of our operations.

They then and there offered "to show you the way to dig, old boy," and I closed with the offer and

went up to the house for more implements, and to let Martha know of the arrival of "Bill" and party, so that she could make preparations for their proper reception. When I got back with the tools I found the band of stalwart volunteers with their coats off and their shirt-sleeves turned up, and looking as though they meant business.

They started at the job with such light-heartedness and such flowing spirits that I felt sorry for them. They looked *so* nice, too, in their white shirts and spruce trousers, that it seemed cruel not to warn them; but I restrained my feelings and let them begin to dig. They were merry when they commenced, almost frolicsome, in fact. They even sang little snatches of song to beguile the time, and when they wanted anything they asked for it politely, and with due regard for each other's feelings. But after half-an-hour's almost unnecessary display of energy a change came over the scene. They no longer laughed, and when they spoke, it was in hoarse, short, panting monosyllables. The spruceness had gone out of their appearance, and the politeness from out of their manners.

Ten minutes later, when Ray accidentally emptied a shovel of dirt over Judson's head instead of into the wheelbarrow, Judson seemed to be quite annoyed about it; and when Judson, in his turn, tried to force his spade through Nodkins's patent leather shoes, and include Nodkins's feet in the excavating, Nodkins said things that would have caused pain and displeasure to my old cow had she heard him. And instead of apologising, as he ought to have done, Judson told Nodkins

he ought not to have his feet in the pit at all. He said there wasn't room for them and us as well.

"Take 'em out and leave 'em in the field there," said Judson, referring to Nodkins's feet. "They'll be able to move about then. This confounded hole is only twelve yards across, and they crowd us so that we can't move."

We pacified them, and Edward and I urged them to keep at it. We told them we were getting along famously—which was true. I could see that they were pretty nearly "fed up" with their self-imposed task, and their zeal was manifestly flagging; but I had set my mind on getting that pond ready for the geese, and the present help being in the nature of a God-send, I intended working it for all it was worth.

Well, we got it dug out at last, nice and deep and roomy, and we squared up the sides and made it look pretty. Then we leant upon our tools, and rested from our labours. That is I and Edward and Nodkins and Judson rested. Ray and Jones, being young and enthusiastic, still continued to wield pick and shovel at the barrier between the ponds.

We were deeply engaged in recalling past events and doings at the old office, and naturally enough, had a lot to tell each other.

"What—" I started to ask.

"—the deuce is this?" finished Nodkins.

Ray and Jones yelled a warning to us; but it was too late to be of any practical assistance, for before we could turn round we were up to our knees in the dirty water that the two young idiots had managed to

liberate from the other pond. It wasn't very deep, it is true; but it was damp and chilly, and very filthy, and we lost no time in clambering out on to the bank. Nodkins came off the worst. He is fat, as I before explained, and not over energetic. He blundered over his shovel, and lay at full length and kicked and yelled until Edward and Jones once more entered the water and rescued him.

I won't dilate on the scene. When they had arrived they presented the appearance of four well-dressed, nicely-got-up fellows, who wouldn't have been out of place at an evening-party, and would have done credit to a beauty show—except for the beauty. The miserable, wet, cold, dirty, and bedraggled party that mournfully wended its way to Myrtle Farmhouse would have been out of place in anything but a stable or a pig-sty. For Edward and I it didn't matter much beyond the chance of catching cold. We were dressed for accidents of this nature. But I felt really sorry for the others, they did look so deplorable. Nodkins, especially, wore such a woe-begone expression that he made me laugh, until he started sneezing, and then I made him run.

Fortunately, Martha and Jane were out of the way, so I was able to get them into the house unperceived, and provide them with a hot bath and a change of rig. After this, and a good stiff glass of tonic to neutralise the water they had swallowed and kill the germs, we descended again, and I introduced the victims to Martha, and then tea was served. And after that nothing more remained of the catastrophe

than the subdued recollection, and a basis for several wretched jokes.

When the tea-things were cleared off we made up a big fire, and sat round it smoking and chatting. The fellows had reckoned on returning to town that night; but neither Martha nor I would hear of it, and besides, as I told them, I really didn't see how they were going to manage it. Their own clothes were too wet and dirty to be put on, and they couldn't very well go as they were.

When we apportioned the wardrobe, a pair of my old pants had got allotted to Judson. I am a short man and Judson is a long man. Result:—Judson's



legs, or a long portion of them, were plainly visible between where his trousers left off and his socks began. They were altogether a most awkward squad of men to fit, except Ray, who didn't look at all bad in one of Edward's suits. Nodkins was too stout to fit anything we could offer him, and he had to cram him-

self into a pair of old flannel trousers, and don my dressing-gown, and the result was more comfortable than pretty. They therefore bowed themselves to the inevitable, and consented, with easy grace, to accept our hospitality.

They despatched Jane with telegrams to their respective families to announce their whereabouts—excepting Jones, who lived in diggings, and was not likely to be worried over by any one—and we renewed our pipes and conversation.

We had some music, too, and altogether passed a very jolly evening, until the clock assured us it was getting late. Then we showed them to their respective bunks—Ray and Nodkins had the room that Edward used to inhabit, Jones occupied the spare bedroom, and Judson was accommodated on the breakfast-room couch with a couple of chairs end to end at the foot to hold his legs—and there we left them for the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MANAGEMENT OF POULTRY.



HERE was a train about eight in the morning that would suit the fellows nicely: but long before that we were up and paddling around the farm and folds, inspecting things. Murmurs of envy and admiration accompanied my explanations of this or that, and exhibitions of field and flock, and I got quite elated. I was careful to exclude all mention of the drawbacks to my present life, and to dilate on the advantages and pleasures thereof, until the accumulating emotion found vent in the unanimous expression that I was "a lucky dog, a confoundedly lucky dog."

We picked up Edward during our perambulations, and he and I went down to the station and saw them off. We enjoined all of them to come down again soon, and they assured us they would be only too pleased. Then the train steamed out of the station, and so passed a very enjoyable little break in our dull and monotonously peaceful existence.

When Slimmer assured me that I should have no trouble in rearing my geese, he spoke rather beyond his knowledge, for, as a matter of fact, I had a great deal of trouble, and even then I never did complete the rearing, nor reap any benefit for my trouble and outlay.

The very same day that my visitors left me I was down putting the finishing touches to the pond. Edward had gone home again. Martha was over at Slimmer's, and I was alone. I was so intently engaged with my work that I didn't hear the gate open, and I only became conscious that I had got a visitor when I was accosted in rough, rasping accents. I started up, and found myself confronted by an individual of the tramp fraternity. He was a mild-looking man, with watery blue eyes, and fair hair, and a snuffle that spoke eloquently of nights passed under hay-ricks, and leaky boots. He was about the dirtiest specimen of humanity that I think I have ever seen, and that is saying a lot. I noticed, too, that he was carrying a tattered old sack which, judging from a considerable amount of squirming going on therein, evidently contained live stock of some description.

"Morning, mister," he said, when I had taken in these observations. "I've got a couple of hanimals 'ere as ought to suit you."

So saying, he dived into the murky depths of his sack, and brought out two young geese. They were muddy, but otherwise seemed to be in a fair state of preservation and health.

"Oh!" I remarked, carelessly, "where did you get them? Steal them?"

He didn't reply; but he looked at me with such a sad, reproachful look that I immediately begged his pardon, and gave him a pipeful of tobacco. With pathetic mournfulness he sucked away thoughtfully at his dirty clay, as though he were calling up his reserve

stock of Christianity to forgive my unfortunate remark. After a little rumination, he evidently concluded to overlook the matter, seeing that I was so sorry.

"No, mister, I didn't sneak 'em," he said, drawing his coat-sleeve across his moistened eyes. "They belonged to my poor wife, and it 'urts me cruel to part with 'em. When she died yesterday, she says to me, she says: 'Bill, yer won't part with my gooseses. Promise me yer won't.' She were that fond of 'em, mister, you wouldn't believe. Well, in course I had ter promise, and, s'elp me, if I could only borrer the money for the funeral I wouldn't take gold for 'em, that I wouldn't. But wot's a poor man ter do? Like the poct chap that yer reads on, I can't borrer, to beg I'm ashamed, and I was brought up 'onest, mister, and would rather go in the work'us than steal."

I felt mean and contemptible in the presence of so much virtue, and in a softened tone I asked him what he wanted for his late wife's cherished pets.

"Well, mister, yer won't be 'ard on a pore man I knows; say 'alf-a-dollar a piece, and you'll get 'em cheap, and I'll try and scrape up the rest of the stumpy (money) some'ow."

Here he fairly broke down, and sobbed aloud. "All right, my man," I said, cheerily, to comfort him. "I'll take them. Here's ten shillings, never mind the change."

He still continued to sob; but it was in a resigned and grateful sort of way, as though he were touched by my sympathy and help.

"Thank yer, mister. Thank yer," he ejaculated, hoarsely, transferring the money to his dirty pocket,

and handing over the birds. "You'll be kind to 'em, sir, won't yer? Hemily were that fond of 'em it would break 'er 'art if she knew they was treated bad."

I assured him that I would treasure his deceased wife's pets a though they were my personal friends, with a mental reservation as to Christmas operations.

He thanked me again and again, and touching his hat, slouched down to the gate, and I saw him no more. I wish I could see him once again, just to talk to him kindly and gently, and take him by the shoulder and assist his tottering footsteps along to the police-station.

My first thoughts after being left in possession of the birds were: "What 'on earth did I want to buy these for?" After a time, kinder feelings came to my aid, and I reflected on my generous action and felt pleased.

"Poor fellow! He wanted it badly," I said to myself, meaning the money. "Besides, I can do with a couple more geese. Half-a-dozen is a nice round number, in geese."

I moved across to the pen with my purchase, and let them loose, to make the acquaintance of the other four. The geese themselves would, no doubt, have been pleased to chum up with four of their kindred, had there been four to "chum up" with. As it was only two put in an appearance to welcome the strangers, and all my diligent search failed to discover the missing couple.

Then the truth dawned on me. I had purchased two of my own geese at a ruination price, and I felt

mad enough to kick myself. I wondered how on earth I could have been such an idiot. Fancy me, Thomas Henry Smith, being taken in by such a miserable wretched impostor, and such a cock-and-bull yarn. I laughed bitterly to myself when I remembered my promise to be kind to "Hemily's" pets.

There was nothing to be done, of course, but to reconcile myself to the loss of my money, and keep the transaction strictly to myself. It was ten chances to one, if I gave information to the police, that they would ever catch the fellow. Clever rogues of that sort want a deal of catching, and the story would circulate round the village, and I should never hear the last of it.

Misfortune seemed to attend those birds all along. I had grown them to a presentable size, and fattened them up, till I got quite proud of them, and fetched in everybody I knew to admire and praise them. About a fortnight before Christmas, as though they were conscious of their approaching fate the geese suddenly went off their feed, and began to dwindle again, until I seriously thought a retrogressive movement had set in with them, and they were going back to the days of their happy goslinghood. In haste and alarm, I consulted Slimmer, and he came over and viewed the invalids.

"Want of exercise," he pronounced, didactically. "Turn 'em out, and let 'em scratch a bit."

"Where?" I inquired.

"Oh, most anywhere," he replied, "Into the lanes. Let 'em run wild about the lanes and field for a day or two, and you'll have no more trouble with 'em."

I followed Slimmer's prescription, and turned the geese loose to wander at their own sweet will. It answered beautifully. I never did have any more trouble with them, for I have never set eyes on them from that day to this. Whether the dwindling process continued, and they wasted away and vanished, ghost-like, or whether they were annexed, and sold to cover the expenses of some unfortunate Hemily's funeral, I know not—I incline to the latter theory—but the birds we sent up to Slimmer for our contribution to the dinner on Christmas Day were supplied from the London market, and I am perfectly willing to admit that although there are many things I can do, raising geese for home consumption is not one of them, and at *that* I am an utter failure.

CHAPTER IX.

AN OLD-FASHIONED CHRISTMAS.



T was Christmas-day in our village. Possibly it was Christmas in other villages as well; but that doesn't concern me or this story. A regular wintry Christmas it was, too. One of the old-fashioned sort, with the snow covering the country round with its chilly mantle, and crunching under the feet of the procession of the residents as they marched briskly over it on their way to church. It had been freezing severely for some weeks past, and the air was crisp and keen, although the sun shone brightly overhead.

After church, we all returned with Slimmer, for it had been arranged that we should unite under his roof, and pass the festive season together there. A bright and merry party we were, when we gathered round the immense dining-table, and prepared to do justice to the fare before us.

Edward and his young wife were the principal personages there. They were, in fact, the chief reason of the gathering.

The wedding, in deference to Ada's wish, had been a quiet one, and the Christmas season now coming round Martha and Mrs. Slimmer had put their heads together, and resolved to utilise it for a more elaborate jubilation.

Less important members of the assembly were Martha and I, and the Slimmer family down to the fifth and sixth generations. In addition to this, Slimmer had gone out into the highways and bye-ways for weeks past, and had invited everyone with whom he had more than a nodding acquaintance to be present.

The Church was worthily represented by our vicar; law and medicine by the local solicitor and doctor; the army by a retired major, with only one arm and chronic gout; and agriculture by all the farmers within walking distance. Education was very much *en evidence*. The Misses Keighly—two maiden ladies of uncertain age—who keep the village school, and are at once the terror and the butt of the rising generation—represented this important factor of civilisation, and emphasized their presence at every possible opportunity.

We were rather cramped for room; but everybody was good-natured over it, and didn't seem to object in the least to the close quarters. The juvenile portion of the gathering were accommodated with a table to themselves in the scullery. Individual members occupied occasional tables placed round the wall, and one or two even took their well-filled plates to the stairs and dined there, sitting on the lower steps and resting their plates on their knees.

Slimmer was in his element. He had something to say to everyone. He laughed, and talked, and made speeches, and chaffed his daughter to such an extent that she got confused under his banter, until his spouse, with maternal tact, drifted him off to see

how the children were getting on, when we heard his loud tones and boisterous laughter encouraging, somewhat unnecessarily, the youngsters to greater gastronomic feats, and promising half-crowns to the girl who eat the most Christmas pudding, and the boy who eat the least, until Mrs. Slimmer went out and hustled him in again.

After dinner we had speeches, and drank health and success to each other, and expressed hopes of many more such gatherings. The gallant major made a speech, and put himself into a good humour for the rest of the day by working off on us his pet anecdote about the time when he was engaged in some complicated military manœuvre that would, as far as we could gather, have been frustrated and set at nought by the enemy if it hadn't been for his opportune arrival on the scene, etc., etc. Then the lawyer made a speech. The clergyman followed him, and Slimmer followed the clergyman. As Slimmer's speech was composed of many variations on the theme of his daughter's marriage, and praise of his new son-in-law—of whom Slimmer thinks everything—Edward naturally had to reply, and by the time he had done, we had sufficient both of dinner and oratory. So we adjourned the meeting, and dispersed ourselves about the house to chat and smoke, while Mrs. Slimmer and Martha and one or two more ladies assisted the servants to remove the wreckage, and straighten up the place.

When this was done, Slimmer proposed we should repair to "The Links"—a big, open stretch of water

adjacent his fields—and indulge in a little sport over the ice. Skates were sorted out and distributed, straps were annexed, wherever found, and the cortège set off in a merry body to the scene of operations. Those who couldn't skate or hadn't the necessary implements to skate with, were directed to slide, and those who could neither slide nor skate had to find their amusement in watching the others, or promote warmth and digestion by running round the pond.

Many of the ladies stuck to the fireside, and settled themselves for a cup of tea, and a feminine chat. Ada was not of them, though. She was one of the skating party, and so nice did she look as she flitted round the pond under Edward's personal charge, that I am afraid there was a great deal of envy, hatred, and malice in the breasts of many of the young fellows present who had been in the running for her hand, and had seen her carried off under their noses by an interloper, who had easily accomplished in three or four brief weeks what they had failed to do in as many years.

"Hello, Smith! Not me skating?" yelled Slimmer to from across the pond.

I explained to him that I was *not* skating, and for two very good reasons. In the first place, I had no skates, and in the second, I could not have used them had I had them to use.

"Never mind," he consoled me with. "I can't skate either. Come and help us fix up a slide." I did so, and I fancy the party we formed for this juvenile pursuit was as merry and jolly as that of the more

aristocratic skaters, and even more so if one might judge by the numbers of them who, after wistfully



regarding us from afar, discarded their skates and came over and joined us, and assisted to "keep the pot a-boiling."

At this healthy and invigorating pastime we passed the afternoon until the waning light, and the gradual approach of a thick white cold fog gave us the impression that it was time to return to the house. So a general warning was sounded, the skaters left the ice and deftly removed their irons, wandering couples were recalled, and, reunited, we marched back to the house where warmth and light awaited us.

The front room at Slimmer's boasts one of those old-fashioned open fireplaces that are so seldom met with now. Slimmer, himself, is proud of it, and wouldn't have it altered for anything. The entire house is very old, and has been in the Slimmer family for years

and years—handed down from father to son through many generations. But old houses lack a great many things which even their quaint picturesqueness doesn't entirely make up for, and Slimmer has so altered and improved the place during the thirty odd years it has been his property that very little of the original, beyond the walls, existed save and except this fireplace.

Massive chumps of wood were now spluttering and blazing away in it, lighting up the room, and sending bright showers of sparks roaring up the capacious chimney.

The juvenile portion of the community indulged in a Christmas tree, and sundry games which seemed to necessitate a vast amount of noise and gesticulation to be carried out properly. The seniors amused themselves, each according to his or her individual fancy, which for the most part consisted in sitting about the room, and wearing huge and amiable smiles, and eating and drinking, and smoking or chatting according to sex and age. Some there were whose tastes seemed to extend beyond these prosaic pastimes. Young and spoony couples these were for the most part, and *their* idea of a rational and intellectual method of spending an enjoyable Christmas Day seemed to consist in sitting about the stairs in the cold and semi-light, and engaging in such deep and earnest conversation in undertones, that they only became aware of your presence when you precipitated yourself over them to the bottom of a long flight of stairs. Then they would recall themselves to a

recollection of everyday commonplace affairs just sufficiently to hope that you hadn't hurt yourself, and express their sorrow; but before you could assure them that you were only amusing yourself, and, in fact, extracted a considerable amount of enjoyment from a fall down a flight of good solid steps they would be promptly lost again, and unconscious alike of you and your sarcasm. No less than three times that evening did I blunder over three separate and distinct couples in this fashion, and after that I took a candle with me in my travels, and coughed audibly as I went along by way of a danger signal.

As time grew on several of the guests left us, taking the children with them, and leaving a staid party of elderly married folks behind to finish up the festivities, and conclude such an enjoyable day worthily. With the aid of music and dancing we accomplished this, and then, hot and tired with our exertions, we drew our chairs round the hearth in a big circle, heaved more logs upon the fire, and sat there until close on two the next morning. Then, with a parting glass and kind wishes of health and prosperity to each other, we disbanded, and another Christmas Day was gone.

The guests sorted out their wraps and departed in twos and threes to bear each other company along the dark and dismal lanes that led to their dwellings. The Major and the Doctor gallantly escorted the Misses Keighly to their residence on the outskirts of the village, and several lonely bachelors did the same thing for other unprotected spinsters.

Slimmer wouldn't hear of our going back that night, so Martha, Mrs. Slimmer, and Ada retired to bed, while Slimmer, Edward, and I made up the fire, brewed a steaming bowl of punch, and, lighting our pipes, sat round the fireplace in comfortable big easy chairs, and discussed everything and anything from potato-bugs to spiritualism and Home Rule. It was the most enjoyable Christmas I remember, and when I got to Myrtle Farm, what with the excitement and the punch, the late hours and the general sense of pleasure and comfort, I went straight off to bed, and slept the sleep of the just till six o'clock the following morning.

CHAPTER X.

SPRING, GENTLE SPRING.



AFTER what seemed an interminable length of time, the leaden skies and hard frosts of winter began to leave us. Soft, gentle rain fell, on a rough average, about seven days a week. The buds sprouted on the trees and bushes, the birds warbled gaily, the animals gamboled and frisked in the slush, and "spring, spring, beautiful spring," had come once again.

Spring to the poet, means green verdure, and frisking lambs, and pretty maidens. Spring to the farmer—even an amateur make-believe farmer, in a small way of business, like myself—means work; good, solid, substantial work, and no shirking. I recognised this fact, and had been storing up my energies and laying my plans through the past winter, and now nothing remained but to put them into operation, and carry them through.

I had come down to this place, I put it to myself, to be a farmer, and up to the present I had done nothing much to entitle me to the name. But now there was going to be an alteration. I would work hard and cover myself with glory, and be looked up to by the surrounding farmers as a man who knew a thing or two. Even Slimmer should respect me,

and solicit my advice. I would carry off the prizes at the cattle shows, and my crops should obtain a world-wide reputation. Yes! I would show them how to farm; and, as a start, I subscribed to a leading agricultural paper, and invested in several volumes on the rearing of farm stock, the use and abuse of manures, and many more of a like exhilarating nature.

The agricultural paper, particularly, was of great assistance. It livened me up. It taught me many things about farming that my own practical experience had never even suggested. It was called *The Plough Handle*, and was a monthly journal devoted to the interests of farmers. It was as good as a tonic for my frequent depression of spirits, and after reading up a few of the back numbers my thoughts would be similar to those I used to indulge in on farm life generally, in the far-off days when I was engaged in the exciting pursuit of book-keeping. After an evening's course of it—*The Plough Handle*, I mean, not book-keeping—it seemed to me that farming was more fit for poets and æsthetic people generally than for rough, coarse flesh-and-blood people like Slimmer and one or two more I know, who smoke shag tobacco in dirty clay pipes and tie their trouser-legs up with bands of straw. It seemed a refined joy: an exquisite bliss; a sort of recompense after a life of hard, honest toil, to which weary man may turn in solace, and find that although life is not all beer and skittles, yet the beer and skittles abound in sufficient quantities to reward the deserving, and even leave over a small percentage for the undeserving.

That is what I used to think about farming over night when sitting before the fire with Martha, *The Plough Handle*, and my pipe. In the morning when, arrayed in a get-up as near to that of a bathing costume as propriety allowed in consequence of the incessant rain, I ruminated, with my feet in the mud, and my elbows on a spade, I would think that farming was—well, something different. Rain is generally depressing, and mud is abomination when you've got to go out and dig in it, and stir it up and trample it about as though you had reverted to the days of your early youth, and were engaged in manufacturing mud pies on a gigantic scale.

I dislike digging. Even on fine days, and under the most favourable circumstances, your back aches, and gets bent forward, and so set there that you are afraid to straighten yourself again lest, peradventure, it break in the operation, and your shoulders contract, and you take on a chronic hump.

But digging in wet weather is ghastly, and didn't ought to be allowed except for convicts, tax-collectors, local boards, and such like people. Hoeing is as bad, if not worse. *That* was a phase of farming I was unacquainted with—I might never have been a farmer if I had previously known its joys—and I sort of slid into it unawares. This is how it was. I got my ground dug over nicely, and planted therein seeds (which the birds picked up as promptly as I put them down), and young plants (for which caterpillars performed the same kind offices), and left them to sprout and flourish, and supply me with green-stuff for my table.

At first I marvelled at the quickness of their growth and vigour. It was almost tropical. I ascribed it to the wet we were getting, and I rubbed my hands and waxed cheerful. But after a few days it became palpable, even to my inexperienced eye, that the fresh, green verdure covering my different plots was distinct and separate from the peas, and potatoes, and beans, and cabbages I had planted there. I was cultivating weeds unmistakably.

I consulted Slimmer. Slimmer said: "Hoe 'em."

Accordingly I hoed them, and when I had done I owed—pardon the jokelet—Slimmer some little resentment for the advice. Of all the back-breaking, spine-aching, miserable, virtue-destroying, and temper-annihilating jobs connected with the life of a farmer—and there are many such—hoeing is about the worst.

For three days I laboured long and earnestly, and wrestled at those weeds with a hoe—a veritable mediæval instrument of torture—and at the expiration of that time I was sore in body, my temper was almost hopelessly shattered, the weeds were gone, and the ground was in exactly the same condition as it was before I had planted it. Along with the weeds I had hoed out such of the sprouting seedlets as the birds had spared. I gave up then, and carried the hoe in and burned it in the kitchen grate, and took a long course of *The Plough Handle*. This soothed me, and encouraged me to try my fortunes again. So I bought a fresh lot of seeds, and a new hoe, and hired a small boy to walk round and scare off the birds. And I instructed the unfortunate little victim

in the use of the said hoe, so that, while scaring away the marauding songsters by his presence, he could work up his appetite and muscles on the weeds. This plan answered wonderfully and, as I walked around and encouraged him, with my hands in my pockets and my pipe in my mouth, farming seemed to wear a very different aspect. In time it got to be quite enjoyable.

I made arrangements with Slimmer for the more extensive operations, and he sent his men over with a plough, and prepared the fields and planted them for me, and all I had to do was to superintend the men, and then watch the result of their labours springing up and ripening.

Slimmer's men evidently understood their business, for the crops they planted thrived wonderfully, and were a great success eventually. They would have been a much greater success if the cow hadn't, unfortunately, got amongst them one afternoon, and after gorging herself on them without the slightest reference to their nature or suitability as a diet for elderly cows, made herself up a bed in the centre of the choicest and most luxurious growths.

But in spite of this, and one or two other little accidents, the crops were successful, and I felt proud and happy when, as spring merged into summer, and the rain, although it fell, ceased falling sometimes, and the sun shone quite often, I had erected two fair-sized hay-ricks of my own growth, and owned a few acres of standing corn that had been remarked upon by several, including Slimmer himself.

CHAPTER XI.

MY HORSE.



ONE evening about the time when summer was merging into autumn, Martha and I were sitting together and talking. All of a sudden Martha observed that she thought we ought to keep a horse. She said a great deal more on the subject besides this. She enlarged so much on the comforts and joys that horse owners experience that I soon came to the conclusion that Martha had made up her mind we were going to keep a horse. I demurred a bit at first, although, to tell the truth, I was favourably struck with the suggestion. The only thing I was afraid of was my lack of experience in dealing with those noble quadrupeds, and a slight dubiousness as to their probable courses of action. They kick, I know, and I believe they are also rather addicted to biting. Likewise they possess a strong tendency to run away with you and precipitate you into ditches and over hedges, and perform other little pleasantries of a like nature.

I told Martha of my fears, and she pooh-poohed them. She said only badly treated horses did that sort of thing. She further stated that if we procured a youngish animal, and brought it up gently and with kindness, it would become a regular pet, and

as harmless as a kitten. I believed her, and the very next day went over and saw Slimmer as a preliminary.

"Slimmer," I said, confidently, "I want a horse. A nice, quiet, gentle animal, with all the elements for the manufacture of a household pet. One that is unacquainted with the art of kicking, and wouldn't bite if you offered him pounds to do so. He must be a creature of such lofty sentiment that he would scorn to run away and upset the trap—a sort of kitten on a large scale, of decent appearance, and tolerably cheap."

Slimmer thought deeply for a moment, and then told me frankly that I had better have one made to order. "For," said he brutally, "all the horses I ever knew did all the things you have named if they got half a chance, and a few dozen others equally pleasant that you have no idea of."

This was discouraging, and I suppose I showed my disappointment, for he told me, after thinking a bit more, that if I could content myself with an ordinary commonplace flesh-and-blood animal, he could manage to procure me one that would at least be sound in health and build, and not stocked with vicious propensities beyond its natural allowance. With this promise I had to content myself, and leaving him with the understanding that he was to pick up the first likely animal he heard of for me, I returned to my own place to make some preparation for its reception. With the aid of the local carpenter and his man I managed to erect a stable adjoining the

cow-shed that answered the purpose for which it was intended very well.

This little operation occupied the best part of a week, and when it was completed Slimmer sent word across that he had heard of a horse that he thought would suit my purpose. He sent the address, and mentioned the price, and advised me to go over in the morning and inspect it, and if I liked it to close with the offer.

Early the following day, therefore, I set out in a cheerful, light-hearted frame of mind to bring home my new possession. It was sure to suit me, I reflected. Slimmer knew too well what he was about to advise me to speculate in a "crock," and even if it turned out to be not quite "all my fancy painted it," with a head like a fiddle and leggy, still I respected his mature judgment too much to set up my own raw inexperience against it.

The owner of the horse appeared himself in answer to my request, and he shook hands and seemed to have known me for a lifetime.

"Ah!" he said, with a beaming smile, "you've come about the hoss. A fine animal, sir; a fine animal; I feels quite sorry to part with him. This way, sir; this way."

I followed him across a stable-yard into a field, and with conscious pride he pointed out the animal Slimmer had selected for me. To my unaccustomed eye it seemed an ordinary enough animal, and looked very much like other horses I had seen. Certainly, there was nothing to go into raptures over; but I put it down to the man's kindness of heart and

natural ebullition at parting with an animal he had reared from its tenderest infancy to its present state of perfection.

"Is he quiet?" I asked, putting on the air of a professional horse-dealer.

"Quiet as a lamb, sir," the man replied. "Why, the children come out often and play with him."

The horse didn't strike me as being particularly lamb-like in the way he launched out his hind-leg when his master went to secure him, and I should certainly object to him as a playmate for anyone, save perhaps my worst enemy, or a remorseless creditor.

The capture was effected after a prolonged chase round the field, during which I had ample leisure to sit on the fence and smoke my pipe, and reflect on what I was about to do.

"He's a bit fresh, sir, the man explained," as he led my purchase up to me, "They always gets like that when they've been running loose for a time. Will you ride him or lead him home?"

There was one thing that I disliked about him—the horse I mean, not the man—now that I could see him at close quarters, and that was his eye. He had got a wicked eye, it seemed to me, and I am sure that he distinctly leered when I said that perhaps I had better lead him, and murmured something about being out of practice now. I have never had my leg across a horse's back in my life, and this statement was misleading; but I didn't feel it incumbent on me to explain as much to the man.

"All right, sir. Thank you, sir," in response to my

explanations regarding the pecuniary part of the transaction. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning," and I was standing alone on the Queen's highway—my horse and I—with a halter in my hand and an uneasy feeling in my breast, as I stared at the horse, and the the horse stared at me.

We took stock of each other some time and then I shook myself together, and said: "Gee up!"

The animal didn't "gee up" to any appreciable extent; but he leered as though to say, "Here's a lark." Then I tried tugging at the halter, and this started the procession—backwards.

I thought it advisable to try the "conquered-by-kindness" theory after that, so I stroked his nose and patted his ears, and assured him he was a good old horse. The intelligent beast accepted my statement as gospel, and made a grab at my hand with his teeth, and, failing to catch it, started a polka mazurka up and down the road, while the leer broadened out into a smile, and the general expression was—"Oh my! what a day we're having."

I lost my temper, which didn't help me much, and would have soundly larrupped the brute, only my anger



was tempered with a wholesome fear of results, and I stood in awe of unknown possibilities. What I should have done I know not. Probably, I might have carried out the strap programme and been dragged along the roadway by the infuriated steed for my pains. Then Providence in the shape of a small and exceedingly dirty little boy—an unusual and singular disguise for Providence to assume, I know—happened along. He—the small boy, I mean—was whistling a cheerful refrain, and seemed to be in the happy condition of having nothing to do and all day to do it in—I learnt afterwards that he had been sent on an errand, and instructed to make all possible haste—which is a characteristic of the small boys in our village.

Like a flash came a happy inspiration, and producing a sixpenny-bit I held it up for the delectation of the said small boy, and beckoned him to approach. He came up slowly, and wondering.

“Do you know how to lead a horse, my boy?” I said, beaming on him through my spectacles.

“Yaws,” he replied.

“Well, I am Mr. Smith, of Myrtle Farm,” I explained. “Do you know Myrtle Farm?”

“Yaws,” answered the lad, with a facetious grin. “Oi ’elped yer cop yer ole pig that day when yer was a scrubbin’ of it with — —”

“Yes, yes, my boy,” I hastily interrupted; “I know. Well, here’s sixpence for you. You take this horse up to my house and wait there until I come, and I’ll give you another.”

“Yaws,” answered the youth. Country boys don’t

waste their words, it seems, and their conversational powers are limited.

With devout thankfulness I handed him the halter watched him pocket the sixpence, and then turned in by some fields to take a cross-cut home. When half way over, curiosity impelled me to turn and see how my scapegoat was getting on with his charge. I found his proceedings instructive and possibly useful for a future occasion. First he butted the horse in the ribs with his head, and then slapped it on the nose with the halter. The animal evidently understood this code, for it ambled sideways to a gate, and waited for the youth to scramble on to its back. Leisurely and with composure this operation was performed, and then, waving his arms in the breeze and every now and again planting his heels in the horse's sides, the youth cantered gaily down the road, singing as he went, and was lost to sight in the bend of the lane. Thus was the obstinacy of the brute overcome by a small boy of fourteen or thereabouts, while I, his senior and superior, had been kept fooling about in one spot for half-an-hour by the same quadruped, all of which goes to prove that man, though he may know a lot, doesn't know quite everything, and may be occasionally taught a thing or two by his neglected and despised junior.

I assimilated this moral as I strode vigorously along, and in due time reached home where I found the boy and the horse waiting my arrival. I gave the boy his promised reward and dismissed him, put the horse into the stable, and went and told Martha that our new acquisition had arrived.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLEASURES OF HORSE-KEEPING.



THE extent to which that animal altered the course of my existence was wonderful.

Before its arrival I used to have quite a lot of spare time. Time there was to run over and see Edward or Slimmer, time to smoke my pipe and walk round inspecting my crops and farm, time to assist Martha in some domestic operation, and time to pass in the company of my cherished *Plough Handle*. When I had got my horse I didn't require any of these luxuries—had no leisure for them, in fact. It is astonishing what that horse did become to me when it began to feel itself at home. Meat and drink and exercise—especially exercise—it was, and recreation and amusement and instruction as well. If you know of any man who suffers from *ennui* recommend him to keep a horse. He will suffer no more. You will, if he happens to be the bigger, and can lay his hands on you within a reasonable period after he has followed your advice—but that's a detail.

If I wanted to go anywhere I couldn't go—the horse would require to be exercised. If I wanted to read, the horse demanded my presence to attend to his feeding. And when I wasn't exercising him, or feeding him, or grooming him, I was improving the

shining hours, with my pipe in my mouth, a spade in my hand, and bitterness in my heart, by cleaning out his stable. After a few weeks of this I began seriously to ask myself whether I wasn't getting just a little too much of horse and too little of anything else. It became a matter of curious speculation with me as to whether I had acquired the horse for my pleasure, or the horse had acquired me for his. I leant rather to the latter opinion, and expressed my conviction to Slimmer, who laughed and said: "Get a man." I got a man accordingly. This answered well for a week, when the horse got tired of him, and kicked him through the stable door. He—the man, not the horse—accepted five pounds as compensation for his injured feelings, and gave me immediate notice and went, informing me before he did so that "that there horse was a devil, and ought to be shot."

I rejected this advice and got another man. This man turned out to be addicted to the bottle. He went out one fine morning with the trap to convey a little farm produce to a distant village, and turned up late at night on foot, and minus his hat, and the horse and trap. When I asked him what he had done with them he cried, and said he was a "mizh-rubbel orfn," and he "hadn't touched a dropsh all day." Then I assisted him down the garden path with my boot, and out of the gate, and have never set eyes on him since. The horse was found browsing in a shady lane some miles away, and brought back to me. The trap was discovered in a ditch. It was battered and bent, and was not worth troubling about, so I accepted a gen-

erous offer of ten shillings from the local wheelwright, and left him to do what he could with his bargain.

Sadly and with reluctance I again undertook the responsibilities of the horse's education and care; but I never seemed to quite get the hang of equine management. There could have been nothing wrong with the animal either. With other people he was as good as gold, and Slimmer, who used to borrow him frequently, said he was the best horse he had ever had to deal with—a regular treasure.

My own private opinion was that it wasn't a horse at all. It was a demon, and, after a few months, what with the nervous tension, and the constant worry and work it necessitated, I became subject to fits of melancholia, and looked long and anxiously in my looking-glass in search for grey hairs.

The grey hairs didn't come, they hadn't time. One bright day in late autumn I took Martha for a long country drive. The horse was in a fairly good humour, for a wonder, and accomplished five miles or so in fine style. Then something suddenly occurred to him, and he stopped dead. I coaxed him, and he sulked. Finally, I whacked him, and he backed us into a green and dirty pond, and unloaded us there.

We got out, and Martha, after drying herself at an adjacent cottage, went home by train. She says she will never let me take her for a drive again. She never will have the chance. I'm not going driving again. I for my part, wet and dirty as I was, led the horse and trap back along the way we had come, to Myrtle Farm. On reaching this haven, I told the boy to

attend to them, and went in doors and made myself comfortable there. I never went near the horse again. A few days later there was a sale near the village, and in it Peter, my late speculation in horseflesh, figured largely. He was sold, with the trap to match, at a decent figure, and with the money thus obtained I bought myself a tandem tricycle, which is safer and not so exciting.

Martha has taken to it kindly, and we have had many a jolly spin on it. It caused a little excitement amongst the locals at first, but they soon got acclimatised; and one or two smart spankings took the edge off the pleasure that their hopeful progeny extracted from shying turnips and "wuzzles" through the wheels. It never kicks or bites, and if it does require a little more energy to get along than the late lamented Peter did, still it is certain in action and temper, is cheap to keep, requires no more attention than our boy is able to give it, and allows me a little leisure for *The Plough Handle* and other pleasures, which is, I think, a summing-up strongly in its favour.

CHAPTER XIII.

AND LAST.



ND now, as the chill days of winter steal on us, and the fresh, green verdure of the country fades away in the late autumn to dull gold and oblivion, so must I fade away and go and clean the cow-house. I have been sitting here long enough now telling you about my country life, and I can spare no more time for this purpose. Cow-houses and pig-sties, like time and tide, wait for no one; they proclaim their neglected state in stentorian tones, and the fell sanitary inspector swoopeth down like unto a bird of prey, and then—forty shillings and costs, and “don’t do it again, or it will be the worse for you.”

There are several things that I haven’t told you of. For instance, I haven’t recorded how my bulldog Demon chivied an unfortunate tax-collector up an apple-tree and kept him there two hours, while I was standing round the corner of the stable and enjoying the innocent playfulness of the frisky pup. I resolved to give Demon a substantial meat supper as a sort of reward. Of course, it was rather hard on the man in the tree; but then he might just as well have been a tramp or a buglar, and I considered the training to Demon was invaluable.

The collector seemed to get cramped and uneasy on his perch, for after yelling frantically for succour, and obtaining none—mostly all the succour was out shopping, except the portion represented by myself, and that was round the corner by the barn, sitting on a wheelbarrow, and smoking, and smiling placidly through its spectacles—resolved, with noble independence, to rescue himself. He called Demon a “good dog—a nice old chap”—a character that Demon’s own parents wouldn’t have ventured to give him—and lowered his legs gingerly down. Demon sprang up and caught him by the trousers-leg, and hung there until the cloth broke and let him down to *terra firma* once again. The collector concluded to stop in the tree, and climbed further to the top to admire the scenery.



This called up a train of thought on my part, and in wondering how much per pair the unfortunate trousers had cost their owner I unconsciously laughed aloud. Then, seeing my presence was no longer a secret, I put on a stern and angry air, and walked across to the tree and asked Demon what he imagined the game to be.

He showed me at once. That is the best of bull-

dogs—they are so thorough. Demon is. He didn't content himself with a mere ordinary statement of facts; but he entered into the spirit of the things, and gave me a practical illustration. I went and sat up in the tree along with the collector, while Demon laid the patch he had annexed from my trousers alongside that of the collector's, and matched the patterns to see whether they would fit the crazy-quilt he no doubt contemplated making to cover his bed with during the ensuing severe weather.

They were evidently a decided acquisition, for Demon looked up at us and distinctly smiled after his scrutiny. If it wasn't for the sanitary inspector I might tell you how we passed the time together—the collector and I—and might even give you a list of the terms of endearment we hurled at the watchful Demon, and other information anent the subject.

Martha got us down at last. She offered to swop a huge beef-bone for us, and Demon closed with the offer, for which we were properly thankful. We overlooked our uncomplimentary valuation in Demon's eyes, and resolved not to let this matter trouble us. Demon didn't get his meat supper though. He would have got shot, only, after I had borrowed a gun and been instructed in the handling of it, I discovered that he had gone for a walk, and by the time he got back more gentle feelings prevailed, and I resolved to turn him into hard cash instead, and purchase a canine whose education and taste for art didn't run in the direction of patch-work.

If it were not for that sanitary inspector I might

give you a full and complete history of the foregoing instead of just a brief outline sketch. I would tell you of the doings of the villagers on several patriotic occasions when the political feelings ran high over the election of our Parliamentary representative, and our little community woke more completely up than I had ever seen it before or since.

I would give you a minute history of how I came to be elected Churchwarden, and my duties in that capacity. I might even describe to you one or two of our Vestry meetings, after my election. They were very exciting and slightly noisy, only, perhaps if you are not acquainted with the ways of vestries, you might find it hard to believe me.

I would tell you how, when our pig was ordered for instant execution, Martha stepped in and objected. She had made a pet of it—I am talking of one of the original pigs, the hero of the scrubbing episode—and cried at the thought of beholding Susannah on the table as sausages or bacon, and vowed she would have none of it.

Further, I would recount to thee, dear reader, how my potatoes yielded not, owing to the machinations of the gentle potato-bug, and how the frolicsome caterpillar got amongst my cabbages, and cried havoc and eat the jolly lot. How the gentle zephyrs of October blew the fruit from off my trees and the roof from off my barn I don't think would be worth my while wasting your time over; but I know you would enjoy hearing about the three prize "wuzzles," I sent to the Agricultural Produce Show, and how the

prize cow got round and devoured them before the judges could inspect them and order me a medal and a pecuniary reward on the spot. But again the spectre of the sanitary inspector looms up, and I am compelled to crush back these tender recollections.

All this and a lot more would I tell you if it were not for the restraining influence before mentioned. Like Tennyson's famous brook, on the subject of Myrtle Farm I could flow on for ever; but the sanitary inspector stands in the way. Reader you owe a lot to that individual. Some of you ought to get up a testimonial for him, and if one of you could manage to rise to an essay or treatise on "The Sanitary Inspector as a Human Benefactor," I am sure it would be appreciated—especially down our way. Here they only regard him in the light of a beastly nuisance, and refuse to allow that he is of any use at all. Such a pamphlet might cause them to alter their opinions—theire is no telling.

One thing I must and will tell you. Edward has acquired a small residence within easy train reach of Waterloo Station, and takes possession of it in a week or two. Ada wished it. She has lived all her life in our village, and, while admitting its other merits, says it is dull. She wants to see a little life and enjoy herself now that she has come into possession of an overgrown pet boy, and Edward, who would try and negotiate for the moon if only Ada hinted that it might tend towards an increase of her happiness, immediately gratified her wish. Martha is jubilant.

She says it will be a good opportunity for an occasional change to run up and see them, and Mrs. Slimmer takes the same view of the matter. Slimmer doesn't say anything about it. He never goes anywhere, and is unhappy away from his farm. Ada wished it, and Edward approved of it, and that was sufficient for him.

"All right, my boy," he said in his genial way, when Edward told him. "Come and see us often, and when you are tired of London come back. We've only you and Ada, and there's the farm for you when we've done with it."


So their little residence is dismantled, and their furniture has been packed off to their new abode, and Edward and Ada are stopping with the Slimmers until the arrangements are completed. Here we must leave them, and here, dear reader, I fancy I must leave you, for the stern call of duty sounds in my ears, and the spectre of the sanitary man points reproachfully to the neglected cow-house.

"Coming, sir, coming. I am only changing my things." And now I must bid——"All right, I'm coming. Give us time to find the rake"——you all good-bye. Farewell, then——"Yes, I'm coming now, this instant. Gimme the bucket, Martha. Now the pitchfork. That's right." It is hard to be hurried away from those you love like this; but, *kismet*—'tis fate, and the sanitary inspector. I go where glory and the cow-shed wait me; and if I shouldn't return, bury—— Oh! I forgot, I beg your pardon, I'm sure." This parting reminds me of the Irish Minstrel Boy, new version—

Farmer Smith to the shed has gone,
With his barrow dragged behind him:
Old boots and trousers he has girded on—
Amidst the cows you'll find him,

And leave him, too. The wrench has come.
Farewell, reader, farewell.

A Commonplace Tragedy.

T was evening time in July. The slanting rays of the setting sun shone down on the old court-house of ——shire, where the assizes were being held, and never yet has that sun shone on a more fearsome, more ghastly scene than it did then.

The dense throng within the great building held its breath while, in obedience to the mandate of the court official, a girl rose trembling from her seat, and, with face blanched with a nameless terror and despair, clutched the rail before her, and even with that support swayed to and fro in the golden light

“Maud Merton,” said the Judge harshly, assuming the black cap, and leaning forward to emphasise the dread sentence of the law he was about to pronounce, “you have been found guilty of the heinous crime of poisoning your young child. For this crime you must die. It is true that the jury, in pity for your youth, have added a recommendation to mercy to their right and just verdict, and this recommendation will be forwarded to the proper quarter; but I warn and implore you to build nothing on it. To my mind, your action was wantonly and wickedly atrocious, and except for your youth I fail to see the slightest circumstance to urge in mitigation of your punishment.

The sentence of this Court is that you be hanged by the neck until you be dead, and that your body be buried within the precincts of the prison in which your execution takes place, and may God have mercy on your soul."

Still she clung to the rail in front of her, seeming neither to hear nor understand what had taken place, until the warders came behind her, and half dragged, half carried her back to the cell which was to be her last home on earth.

The crowd breathed once more, and smiled, jested, and joked as it made its way into the open air again, while the Judge hastily divested himself of his robes of office, and drove off to attend the ball being held that evening in his honour, and the fate of Maud Merton, being thus sealed, was left to time for fulfilment.



Maud Merton was an orphan. Three years previous to the time when she stood in the fatal dock she had been a very child in years, experience, and knowledge of the evil of the world and man.

The failure of a bank had robbed her of the life of ease and happiness that should otherwise have been hers, and the death of her parents at the same time, when she was barely seventeen deprived her of the protectors that no girl should be without, and thrust her upon the world to be the prey of the first scoundrel who came along.

Unhappily for herself, Maud Merton had not even the fortune to fall into the hands of a scoundrel, for

perfect love and innocent trustfulness may move a scoundrel to pity and compassion; but what will influence a selfish, weak, despicable cur in human shape to abandon the attributes he does but disgrace and become even the semblance of a man?

Wilfred Waters was of this type. The son of a wealthy father, and the spoilt and petted darling of a mother criminal in her folly of his upbringing, without being vicious, for which he lacked sufficient pluck, he was as weak and mean and repulsive a specimen of manhood as could well be found. Without heart, without courage, debased and brutal in his instincts, he possessed neither intellectual capacity, nor human feeling. His religion was the enjoyment of the hour, and his God was self. In appearance he was handsome in face and figure, with an effeminate cast of features, and a smooth plausibility of manner that charmed the women-kind with whom he came in contact, while it filled their husbands and lovers and brothers with an unholy desire to kick him. Such was the man unkind fate threw across the path of Maud Merton.

She had taken to her needle for subsistence when thrown upon her own resources, and could at any rate manage to live, with care and economy in dress and food, and meagre apartments in the neighbourhood of a London square in the West Central District.

She was a young girl, charming in manner, graceful in appearance, pretty of face, and simplicity itself. He was handsome, plausible, and winning. He made her acquaintance by accident. Her person captivated him, her modesty inflamed him, and being used to have

what he wished at all costs, and lusting for her the more as he recognised that she was unapproachable, he threw prudence and everything else on one side and married her, secretly and in the name that he had chosen to make himself known to her by, and which was accorded to her by the neighbours in the village where he settled her.

For a time things went smoothly enough. He was sufficiently infatuated with his young wife and satiated with the gaieties of the world to be content with his new existence, and she, by contrast with the dreary, pinched hopelessness of her former life, was as perfectly happy as it is possible to be.

But under this peaceful contentment lay working the elements of the ghastly tragedy that subsequently ensued, and they matured when the son that was born to them had barely reached the third month of its brief existence.

The gaieties (Heaven save the mark, for this simple word too often comprehends scenes and acts the like of which not even Zola's pen dare more than hint at) of London were too attractive to be supplanted by a life of mere simple domesticity such as he was leading, and the chains of a pure woman's love were all too light to hold him long after the first heat of passion had died away. Wilfred Waters was "detained in London on business" for periods increasing in number and time, until his home-comings resolved themselves into casual visits of no lengthy duration; and even these were productive of no happiness for his hapless wife, for she, with a woman's readiness, detected that some-

thing—she knew not what, for a belief in her husband's honour and fidelity were, with her, almost a creed—had come between them to rob her of the brief, fleeting happiness that had been hers.

Something—a great deal to Waters's sordid little soul—had indeed come between them. Dissatisfied with his son's idleness and extravagance, as well as with the vague rumours of a life of ill-living that will float, be the culprit as secret and as crafty as [he may, his father had lately drawn the purse-strings very tight, and had hinted pretty plainly that further supplies would only be obtained by a complete alteration in his mode of life, which had to be evinced by his marrying and settling down with the daughter of a brother-merchant.

To this Waters himself was in no way disinclined if, to use his own phrase, "he hadn't been such a — — fool as to marry that chit of a girl whose face was her only recommendation and whose whining complaints have sickened me of my sorry bargain long since." But however inclined he might be to submit to his father's dictum, he had no resource but to refuse it, and, saddled by debts which he could not meet and by a wife whose existence he could not or dare not ignore—for he hadn't the courage to risk bigamy—to vent his rage and disappointment in useless curses and passively brutal conduct towards the obstacle in his path.

For a long time he brooded savagely and resentfully over his position, and then the casual reading of a paragraph in an evening paper showed him a clear and safe road out of his difficulties, even while the

ghastly horror of it blanched his cheek, and caused his hand to tremble as one stricken with palsy.

Then ensued a battle between himself and what did duty with him for a conscience. This idea of his—it had hardly become a scheme at that time—was one of deadly fascination. During the daytime he put it from him with a persistency that astonished himself, but in the long night watches it returned again, and enthralled him with the vision it opened up of freedom, wealth, and voluptuous idleness for the remainder of his days. And in the end, as any such conflict must do with such a nature as he possessed, it triumphed.

A few more days were passed in evolving and maturing a safe and certain course to be adopted; and then, with the assistance of copious and frequent doses of brandy, he proceeded on the truly devilish work in hand.

“Maud, dear,” he remarked, casually, one afternoon a day or two after his unexpected arrival and singularly altered demeanour towards her had filled his wife with renewed hopes for the future, “I want some laudanum for an experiment I am engaged upon. You might get me some when you are out this evening. Go to two or three places and get a little at each. They won’t serve you with the quantity I require at one chemist’s, I expect. Just say you want it for a bad toothache, and there won’t be any difficulty about it.”

He endeavoured to keep his tones even and unconcerned; but there was an evil gleam in his eyes as

he saw that the unsuspecting creature had fallen into the trap so artfully laid for her.

"I have got what I could, Wilfred," she said, placing the drug before him that evening. "I had no idea they would make such a fuss about it, though, or I don't believe I would have undertaken the commission. Perhaps it was because I was conscious of the lie I was telling; but they seemed to be quite suspicious of me, and one man positively refused to serve me, and endeavoured to persuade me to let him draw the tooth instead. Wasn't it absurd?"

Her husband made no answer; but in the silence of the night he stole stealthily downstairs with the drug in his hand, and mixing it with a little wine, emptied it into a medicine bottle containing a draught that he imagined his wife was taking.

Having thus prepared his snare, whose diabolical simplicity was intended to allay the keenest inquiry, the cold-blooded villain returned to his bed again and lay down beside her whom he had already murdered in intention, and would on the morrow do so in fact. Even *his* wretched little conscience could find no better term than murder for the act he con-



templated perpetrating, although to the world at large it was to be designated as simply "an incomprehensible suicide."

Fate, however, with a grim readiness, saw much greater possibilities in this situation than Wilfred Waters had calculated upon.

"Do come and look at baby, Wilfred," pleaded Mrs. Merton of her husband on the ensuing morning. "He has been sleeping since I gave him his medicine this morning, and I cannot wake him."

Outwardly calm, though possessed with a hideous fear and apprehension, he followed his wife up to the bedroom. He needed not to look at the child to know that his fears were well founded. The sight of the medicine-bottle which he had tampered with overnight standing with glass and spoon on the table by the cot, told him how his intentions had miscarried as far as the proper victim was concerned.

Mastering himself with an effort, and just glancing at the child lying so quietly in its cot, he said: "I don't suppose there is anything much the matter; but he doesn't seem right. You stay here and I will run round for the doctor."



He ran quickly downstairs, gathered up his clothes

and papers, and passed for ever out of his wife's life. Scarcely any one noticed him on the deserted platform of the little country station, and Wilfred Merton became as dead to the one who had known him as such as surely as though he had been crushed out of existence under the swiftly revolving wheels of the outgoing train. Wilfred Waters landed that night in Paris. Further than this his life does not concern us. He entered these pages a mean, despicable scoundrel, and he leaves them a heartless, cold-blooded fiend.

In returning to the girl—she was even then but a girl—he had deserted, it is too sickening a record to state in detail what subsequently occurred in the closing chapters of Maud Merton's life.

Cruel and heartless innuendoes respecting the periodical visits of a man who was supposed to be the mysterious "Mr. Merton," whom nobody knew and who could not be found, though the police hunted for him high and low; the harsh brutality of a Coroner's Court; the damning evidence of the local chemists; the listless, apathetic despair of a broken-hearted girl, and the whole convicting array of facts, as they knew them, mercilessly pieced together with cruel skill by the clear-headed, case-hardened counsel for the prosecution—what are these to be set down in cold blood and dilated upon? The result of it all I have recorded in my opening paragraphs, and expatiation is needless.

* * *

One lovely morning in August, eighteen hundred and eighty—— the hideous conclusion of a hideous

tragedy took place between the four high brick walls of Her Majesty's Prison of ——. The blue sky was above, and the sun, but lately started on his daily course, peeped over those walls and added the sight he then witnessed to the many such that have been gathered and garnered by him since this world was first peopled by human kind.

There was never yet, in this Christian country of ours, work so dirty that some one couldn't be found to perform it, even to the hanging of a woman; though just whether the hangman is any dirtier than the judge or the lawmakers who arrogate to themselves the attributes of the God they profess to believe in, and dole out accordingly life and death, liberty and captivity as beseems them on the strength of their man-made and man-given appointments, is a point so delicate that I would rather be excused from deciding it.

The ghastly preparations were soon completed, and the prison bell, which up to then had been dolefully tolling, suddenly ceased. A distant clock-tower chimed faintly and sweetly the hour of eight, and the dangling body of a girl was all that remained as evidence of the tragedy that had been enacted.

A few hours later, the prisoners passing in on their way to be tried stepped, with bated breath, across a paving-stone in the courtyard that bore evident signs of having been recently disturbed. Beneath that ominous slab lay all that was mortal of Maud Merton, with four pitch-pine boards for a coffin, and a few inches of quicklime for a shroud.

It was only a young life gone astray, and no one

seemed publicly to observe it; but—if I may venture to divert to my own uses some lines of Mr. Kipling's, which will serve me better than words of mine can do—

When the last great bugle call
Adown the Hurrai throbs.
When the last grim joke is entered
In the big black book of Job's,
And prison graveyards give again
Their victims to the air,
I shouldn't like to be the man
Who laid Maud Merton there.

Mr. Jordan's Reparation.



ARTHUR JORDAN, Esq., sat alone in his rooms in Bloomsbury-square, and pondered idly, for want of a better occupation, over the problem of life generally, and in particular over the mysterious something lacking that rendered his existence less happy than one of his wealth and importance had a right to expect it to be.

Mr. Jordan was a singular character in many respects. A hard-working, industrious, self-made man, he found himself, while still under the age of forty, the head and owner of a wealthy concern, which he had constructed and engineered through various fortunes into an assured haven of settled prosperity.

It was his whim and pleasure to maintain for himself a suite of rooms in what was, after all, only a lodging-house on a superior scale, graduating as it did from the really comfortable and commodious rooms on the first floor, occupied by himself, to sets of three, two, and single rooms as one got nearer to heaven in the sense of leaving earth farther and farther away. There he had lived for the past seven years. He had not a single relative in the world, and with the exception of a few business acquaintances was as much alone as the veriest outcast in the dreary wilderness of bricks and mortar, and stone and marble,

and human wretchedness and human vice, termed London.

In personal appearance, Mr. Jordan was of the very ordinary type of the successful business man, and except for the set expression of stern, indomitable will, he might easily be passed over as too insignificant for notice. In truth, he was a hard man, just to a painful exactitude; but one of whom it would be instinctively said that he never forgot an injury and never forgave it.

His *employés* disliked him cordially, although they were on better terms with his employ, for it was recognised from the cashier down to the office-boy that good, conscientious service was certain of appreciation and a just reward, while to the idle and negligent just as surely came disapproval and dismissal. His landlady stood in mortal terror of him, and everyone else with whom he came into contact classified him in their own hearts as "grumpy," and limited their intercourse with him strictly to their business or personal needs.

Many people stigmatised him as miserly; but in that they did him an injustice, for many an act of kindly benevolence could have been traced to his agency had circumstances placed them on the track. Certainly he was not a man to be moved by tales of woe, however pathetic, and the very keenest of professional beggars knew too much to exercise their function on Mr. Jordan.

There were vague rumours afloat regarding some very old disappointment in a love affair that had early

soured him, and left him with no hope or ambition beyond the care of fostering his business, that had been undertaken when the greatest and best of all rewards, a woman's heart, was to be that of his success. It was not a pretty story. A woman's deception, a friend's treachery, and the ruin of a man's life—a ruin that despoils it of its better attributes, leaving in its stead a spurious ambition that urges him to work that he may not starve—can never be pleasant reading. The story possibly was not true; but true or false, the fact remained that Mr. Jordan was, in the very midst of his wealth and prosperity, an excellent illustration of how the powers of money and arrogance may fall short in realising such happiness as the successful man may reasonably expect.

What gave colour to the belief in an early disappointment was the fact that with womankind, with the single exception of his landlady, he would have no dealings. Many women—especially match-making mothers—knew of him through his position and influence; but none knew him personally, and a stern reserve, invariably accompanied by a cold refusal to all invitations tending to bring him in contact with them, quite precluded the possibility of their ever getting one step nearer to acquaintanceship with him.

And now, having thus introduced the somewhat sorry hero of this story, I may return to where I left him sitting in solitary state, with visions of his past and present life for company. Apparently, his retrospections were not of a pleasant description, for it was noticeable that he rose from them and returned to

his ordinary, everyday pursuits with an increased sternness, and was harder and more taciturn than ever for nearly a week after.

This was a simple enough matter in itself, and it might have passed over as many similar fits had done, only—only it didn't. Mr. Jordan, like many other people was prone to allow his personal dissatisfaction to be visited on those with whom he came in contact, and on such occasions he often lost sight of the justness which usually qualified his harsh and arbitrary actions.

The following morning, while in this state of morbid irritability, he happened to have brought under his notice a very obvious misrepresentation in a communication from a firm with whom he did much business. It was evidently a clerical error which, at any other time, would have been merely frowned at; but, just then, it served as an opportunity for expressing his mood, and he seized on it. Enclosing the offending epistle in its envelope again, he rapidly penned a few acid, biting lines, calling attention to the carelessness, and returned it to the head of the firm who had sent it, and promptly forgot all about the matter.

That afternoon, down by the river, just behind Fenchurch-street station, there was commotion in the office of Messrs. Burley and Blake. The great Mr. Jordan, the firm's principal client, had been offended, and the circumstance called for a victim.

What passed between the heads of the firm is not known; but just before closing time a bell rang in the

office, and the boy whose duty it was to answer it returned with the announcement that Miss May was wanted in the manager's room immediately.

Miss May—a fair, delicate-looking girl of twenty—rose from her seat, and with an expression of distress that was almost fear obeyed the summons.

"This is a very unpleasant duty, Miss May—very unpleasant indeed," the manager commenced, when she entered his presence and had been bidden to seat herself. He was a short, pousy, good-natured little man, and would have given ten pounds out of his own pocket to have escaped the task which had been imposed on him.

"In the letter you wrote to Mr. Jordan yesterday," he continued, "you made a very serious slip indeed, and Mr. Jordan is greatly incensed by it. Mr. Jordan is one of our best clients, as you know, Miss May, and I, er—that is Mr. Burley feels that, under the circumstances, he is bound to mark his sense of your carelessness. I am—that is—dear me, Miss May, this is a very unpleasant duty!"

"Thank you, Mr. Mainly; but I think I understand," the girl replied, pitying his uneasy state, even in the midst of the chill despair that was creeping



over her. "You want to tell me that my services are to be dispensed with. Is that it?"

"I am truly sorry to say it is, Miss May," said the manager, recovering himself now that the worst of the task was over. "Mr. Burley thinks that in the face of Mr. Jordan's letter he cannot retain you in his service longer. Of course, if you greatly wish it, you can finish the week out here; but I should advise you to spend the time in looking for something else. I am directed to pay you a fortnight's salary, and I trust you will be more fortunate in another situation. Good afternoon, Miss May, and good-bye. If I can be of any service in the matter of recommendation you may command me."

That was all—simplicity itself; and yet, that very night, on the topmost floor of the house in Bloomsbury that sheltered Mr. Jordan, a girl cried piteously and shrank dismayed from the world which she was called upon to face, with a capital of thirty shillings, and not a single friend or relative on the face of God's earth to turn to for advice and assistance.

Mr. Jordan slept soundly enough, unconscious of the elements for a tragedy that he had created in the life of the young creature lying in drear and hopeless misery just three stories above his head. Even had he been aware of the predicament into which his petulance had cast a fellow-creature, I doubt whether it would have much concerned him.

"Pooh, pooh!" he, and many more besides himself, would have reflected. "I don't see much to cry about in that. Thirty shillings is a good and useful

sum with which to face the world. I had much less than that when I started, and look at me now. Besides, it's absurd to think that any one can come to any real harm in *this* country—in heathen lands, perhaps; but not in England, where the poor-rate alone amounts in many places to as much as eight-pence in the pound, to say nothing of the many hundreds of thousands of pounds given in charity to the support of 'homes' and 'refuges' and 'shelters,' and the thousand and one benevolent institutions and societies founded for the very purpose of saving the unfortunate and penniless from the fate that he or she doubtless richly deserves."

Miss May, by dint of a rigid domestic economy and the wonderful sustenance contained in penny loaves, which often out of their abundance provided each its two complete meals, managed to exist and to pay her landlady for the following three weeks. The thirty shillings panned out nobly and, I venture to say, did as much in the way of preserving life as any three small gold-pieces turned out from the Mint are capable of. It would have done more and have gone further if a sixth of it hadn't to be expended on an "Employment Agency," which promised much and performed nothing. Another twelfth of the sum went in the purchase of newspapers and postage-stamps, with a result as satisfactory as that of the agency's performance. So really, you see, the money was hampered, so to speak, or it might have far surpassed its actual record.

Even as it was, it did very creditably indeed, and

its feat may be advanced by the comfortable, well-fed, well-to-do social reformer whose delight it is and has been to show the spendthrift masses how life may be passed pleasantly and profitably on ten shillings a week. If this same individual had only gone a step further, and shown how to procure even the ten shillings necessary to continue the experiment, he would have obtained a large measure of gratitude from many of the really needy on earth, and Alice May, at any rate, would have fervently blessed such a friend in need.

Twenty is a hopeful, trusting age ; but Miss May at the expiration of her three weeks had very little of either hope or trust left, and, indeed, her prospects seemed to be as wretched as they well could. She was timid by nature, and sadly diffident for one who had to fight her own way through the world ; so that it was not until she was virtually penniless that any one learnt how badly things were going with her.

Her landlady was the first to make the discovery. She found the unfortunate girl lying in a dead faint—the combined results of disappointment, underfeeding and over-tiredness—one afternoon when she had imagined her to be engaged at her office in the City. She was a good-hearted woman in her way, and, moved by the evident distress of her young lodger, made it her business to find out the nature of the trouble. This was not very difficult, for in her weak and dejected state the poor girl had not strength sufficient even to support her pride, and she readily enough confided her serious position to her sympathetic listener.

"Well, well, my dear!" the landlady remarked, kindly, at the conclusion of the recital. "Things are bad enough with you, it is true; but they might even be worse. I am none so poor that I cannot afford to let your bill run for a week or two, and maybe by that time something will have turned up. And for your board—you can be independent for *that*, if you wouldn't mind lending me a hand through the day. I need it, I am sure. What with the lodgers, and the house, and my own work, I scarcely seem to get a minute to myself."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Jones. This is kind indeed of you," replied the girl, gratefully, drying her eyes and brightening up as much under the cheery tones as the temporary security from destitution and want.

The landlady was as good as her word, and Miss May passed a pleasant enough time with her in assisting with the various duties incidental to the management of so large an establishment.

Nearly a month after this arrangement had been come to trouble overtook the house, and in that thorough way of doing things so peculiarly its own, fate arranged, first that Mrs. Jones should trip over the stairs and break her arm before sending Mr. Jordan home from his office one evening with a racking headache and other symptoms that resolved themselves in the process of time into a severe case of fever of a contagious kind.

Here was clearly an opportunity for repaying some of her debt of obligation to her kind-hearted landlady, and Miss May rose to it nobly. Timid and frightened

when it was a question of facing the horrors of destitution in a large town, she showed herself to be possessed of plenty of courage in this trial. Alone and unaided—the servant made hasty preparations for a holiday at the first mention of “fever”—she attended to Mrs. Jones and the house, while a nurse from a neighbouring institution took entire charge of Mr. Jordan.

Sickness was rife that season—it nearly always is in London—and as soon as all danger of infection was past the nurse was called away to attend to others. Mrs. Jones was able to get about again then, and the servant having been persuaded to return to her duties, it chanced to fall to the lot of Miss May to carry Mr. Jordan through the period of convalescence.

Mr. Jordan, in his weak, helpless condition, was very little changed from the Mr. Jordan of old; but he was strangely tolerant somehow of the presence of his young nurse.

By a chance remark of Mrs. Jones's, Alice had learnt the identity of her patient with the man who had so nearly, if unconsciously, wrecked her life and brought her to despair. It seemed a strange coincidence that it should fall to her, of all people, to attend his wants and wishes; but coincidences do happen now and again, even in such an unromantic locality as Bloomsbury, and Miss May thought nothing more of the matter than was evinced in a slight smile when wondering what Mr. Jordan would say if he were aware that she was the offender who had so incensed him by a trivial slip in a type-written letter that he must needs procure her disgrace and dismissal.

"Miss May," said the patient to her, one afternoon when she had ceased reading, under the impression that he had dropped off to sleep, "do you know that your name is the one thing about you that I have an objection to, if I am allowed to have any objection at all, that is. After all, it is not an uncommon name; but I once had a friend who bore it—Arnold May it was—and he



did me the greatest injury one man may do another."

"Indeed, Mr. Jordan! I am sorry to hear it," replied the girl flushing slightly. "My father's name was Arnold, though I think it is scarcely likely that you could have known him."

"What was your mother's name? if it is not a rude question," pursued Mr. Jordan, eagerly.

"Alice. My name is Alice, and I was called after her," was the reply. "And, indeed, Mr. Jordan, if my father ever did you an injury," she went on, noticing by an almost imperceptible motion that his suspicion was confirmed, "I am quite sure that it was unintentional, for he would never willingly have hurt anyone. But the subject is painful to me, and I would rather not dwell on it, if you don't mind. Both my parents were drowned in a boating accident, barely two years ago, and

I have scarcely used myself to my trouble even yet."

An awkward silence ensued for a while, and then, principally with the idea of putting an end to it, Miss May remarked: "Perhaps it will not surprise you very much to learn that I have identified you with the cause of a great deal of distress to myself only a short time back, Mr. Jordan. You may remember the incident."

And she detailed the event that had led to her dismissal from the firm of Burley and Blake.

Mr. Jordan made some conventional reply; but it was observable that he was extremely thoughtful on several occasions following that afternoon's conversation. He made no reference to it, however, and Miss May herself quite imagined it to be forgotten.

Little by little, through the agency of Mrs. Jones principally, he extracted the greater part of the girl's history, condition, and prospects, and the information thus obtained may have had something to do with the letter or letters Miss May received from him a few days after he had left London to recruit his health and strength by the sea-shore.

There were two distinct letters in one envelope, addressed to Miss Alice May. They were business communications—essentially so, for Mr. Jordan was a business man and had no idea of doing things in any other way.

Dear Miss May [ran one].—Unwittingly, as you are kind enough to believe, I did you a great injury, and willingly enough I offer you such reparation as I have the power to. If you will accept a similar position in my employ to that which my unfortunate petulance deprived you of in Messrs. Burley and Blake's offices, I will instruct my manager to engage you. You can arrange further details with him.—Very faithfully yours, ARTHUR JORDAN.

The other letter, equally business-like, offered her a much nearer and dearer position if she would honour him by its acceptance. Evidently the writer had intended that it should be read first, for he made mention of the other as an alternative in case the proposal in that failed to meet with her approval.

It did not fail to meet with her approval, however. Forty and twenty are wide enough apart; but at times they can be brought very close together, and the loneliness of a big city, perhaps more than anything, can make a home life seem vastly sweet and alluring in anticipation.

Miss May enclosed the proffer of a situation in a neat little letter—not type-written—which ran thus;

Dear Mr. Jordan,—Your first offer appeals to my heart the most, and pleases me better than the enclosed. I accept it gratefully, and trust that your generous reparation may be as productive of happiness to yourself as I feel certain it will be to me—ALICE MAY.

Miss May is Mrs. Jordan now. They live in a pretty little house on the banks of the river by Kingston, and, whatever Mr. Jordan may think of the matter, his wife has never had reason to regret the reparation made for the few weeks of misery into which his petulance plunged her.

Johnson's Little "Spec":

THE STORY OF THE STRANGE CLIENT.



HAD gone up to a legal friend's place of business early in the day on some matter that required professional assistance. I had taken his counsel and some lunch which he offered me, and had been relegated for the nonce to a queer, musty old apartment, furnished with dust and cobwebs, a heavy bookcase, a substantial though dingy leather suite, and a Dutch clock.

"I won't be any longer than I can help, old man," my friend said, drawing on his gloves preparatory to answering an urgent summons to the Courts. "You will find something to look at on the shelves, I dare say, and you have your smoking-tackle with you, so you must nurse the fire and do the best you can till I return. My clerk is away knocked up, unfortunately; but if any one should come in you might just tell them that I shall be back in about an hour."

"Don't hurry on my account," I had replied, and the door swung to and he was gone.

I replenished the fire, filled my pipe, and lolled back in my chair with the complacent, self-satisfied, and comfortable air of a man who has done all his business and dined well.

Now, I have put the clock last, I notice, in my rough inventory of the contents of my friend's business apartment, though, as a matter of absolute right, I ought to have put it first. But it had been so very unobtrusive when I was first ushered into that room that I had scarcely noticed its presence. It was as quiet and decorous as any self-respecting, hard-working clock could be that had its daily and nightly round of unceasing duty to perform—while my friend was with me, that is. As soon as his back was turned, though, it began to assert its presence, and it continued to do so more and more aggressively until—metaphorically speaking, of course—like Pharaoh's lean kine, it swallowed up the book-case and the furniture, even to the pictures on the wall—I wonder they didn't disagree with it; they would have given me indigestion to have lived with them constantly in my sight—and the carpet on the floor, and left me naked and ashamed in a bare apartment alone with it.

At first I fought against its objectionable assertiveness. I even made it disgorge the book-case that I might reach me a book to aid in overcoming its subtle influence. Without avail, however, did I seek for assistance. Its mysterious personality—I know no other word for it—was too powerful for even "Baily on Torts" to overcome; and recognising this, I relinquished the unequal struggle and succumbed before it.

"Tick-a, tick-a, tick-a, tick-a, tick, tick—Daddy won't buy me a bow-wow, wow-wow"—it went, with an ever increasing volume of sound that filled the whole

chamber and reverberated amongst the gas-brackets as the pealing of a heavy, muffled bell might have done, and I caught up the refrain and sang, "bow-wow, wow-wow" silently, in a ridiculously idiotic manner, to myself. I was enabled for the first time to enter into the feelings of Whittington when he sat on the steps at Bow and listened to the bells doing the "Turn again Whittington" business. Time may have softened his temper and changed his intentions; but nothing will persuade me that he conceived and accomplished his lofty purpose with any other idea than that of smashing and mashing those bells so that not the ghost of a jingle should or could remain in the whole twenty thousand pieces. And then the book dropped from my hands, and my chair began to glide slowly and steadily, to the accompaniment of the "bow-wow, wow-wow," towards the clock.

The pace was very slow at first, but it quickened up as we neared the end of what seemed to be the length of a twenty-mile ride, and I gazed fearfully up at the horrible thing that was drawing me to my doom. "Daddy won't buy" we—the clock and I—commenced together for the fiftieth time when, with a sudden jar and rattle, the chair rushed into the clock as though drawn by a magnet, the door slammed behind us, and with a start and a cry I struggled to my feet and confronted a tall, thin, wiry individual, who seemed to be in a state of violent excitement.

"I want justice!" he screamed, banging his umbrella on the table.

"He has just run down to the Courts," I replied,

with astonishing promptitude, considering my state of bewilderment. "He said he would be back in an hour. Will you leave any message, or would you like to wait?" And I indicated a chair near the fire, and prepared to reseat myself.

I had gathered my wits together by this time, and, glancing at the clock which was ticking quietly away to itself in the corner, rapidly reasoned that "Bailey on Torts" had proved too much for me in conjunction with the fire, and that I had been nodding.

The next move of the intruder was alarming, simple though it was. Locking the door, he withdrew the key and, putting it in his pocket, walked up to me and fixed me with the most viciously wild pair of eyes I have ever had the misfortune to be in such close proximity to.

"Are you justice?" he hissed. "Are you a cur of a law-monger?"

I was not; but I looked into those snapping grey eyes and hesitated to say so. I temporised.

"Well, I am connected with the law," I replied. "By marriage," I added to myself, thinking of my brother-in-law who is a solicitor in a provincial town.

"Give me law, then!" he yelled, "or I'll cut you into slices and extract it out of the *débris*."

"Confound the fellow," I thought to myself. "He must be mad." And then the horrible conviction came to me like a flash that the man was mad. I couldn't repress a grin, though, serious as the situation was. The idea of a man acquiring law by being steeped in it so that it could be extracted from refractory or

dilatory legal functionaries by boiling or chemical treatment demanded that much of my risible faculties.

I started out on a train of thoughts conjured up at the notion, for it seemed to me that it would be a jolly arrangement if one could carry it through. How some poor victims of the law's delay would delight in boiling down the judge and the opposing counsel, or, failing that, the judge and their own, and settling their cases out of the precipitate for themselves. There was not much time allowed me to dwell on this interesting opening for students of advanced chemistry, however, for again those wild-looking eyes were advanced to within a few inches of my face, and again was I commanded to hand over all my available stock of justice, as though justice were a commodity that one carried about like small change in one's trousers-pockets.

"Certainly, my dear sir, certainly!"

I replied, seeing that my probable escape from a very uncomfortable, not to say dangerous, predicament lay in humouring this creature until some one turned up to rescue me. "But what sort of law is it you require?"



"Is there more than one kind, then?" he asked, the look of murderous intention giving place to one of dubious and vacillating purpose.

"Oh, dozens." I replied eagerly, gabbling any rot in my endeavour to gain time, and to keep him from dwelling too lovingly on the "slicing up" process, which, though promising as a humorous possibility, was disconcerting to contemplate as a coming personal experience. Besides, it would be such a waste of the poor man's time, for I was convinced that there was not enough law in my composition to pay the expenses of the boiling.

"Why," I continued, "every one of those books in the case there contain two or three varieties of the law, and there is the law for the poor, and the law for the rich, and the law of the road, and of the river, and of chemistry, and of astrology, and the law of necessity and—and—and the necessity which knows none," I concluded, somewhat lamely, stumped for more phrases and by the fear of making a mess of the thing. It isn't safe to presume too far even upon a madman's credulity.

He was clearly astonished, as well he might be, and he made no attempt to conceal this fact.

"Good gracious me!" he ejaculated. "I shouldn't have thought it. And do you know all those?"

"I am connected with the law, sir," I replied, with a proper dignity, "and if I don't, I ought to."

He was impressed, I could see, and anxious to maintain my position, I invited him to tell me the reason for his appealing to the law.

"I want," said he calmly, as though it were quite

a common, everyday sort of requirement, "to compel certain persons to commit suicide according to their agreement."

"Oh! it is a breach of contract case then," said I coming out quite strong legally now that I fancied myself on firm ground. "Go for damages."

"No use," he replied, giving his head a melancholy shake. "They haven't any money. They *must* be made to suicide, or the company will go into liquidation and I shall go on the parish, ruined in my old age by a set of loafing, lazy, rascally thieves whom I have been keeping in ease and luxury for months and months."

"Um, that's bad!" I said commiseratingly. "I hardly know how to advise you. In the first place, I have grave doubts whether the law can be applied to enforce such a contract, because, you see, suicide is an illegal act, and as such the law will not recognise it."

"Is that so?" he queried, anxiously.

"Bailey on Torts says it is," I replied, mentioning in my haste the first authority that came uppermost, though I have grave doubts as to whether Baily ever said anything of the sort; but the case was urgent and a little inaccuracy may be forgiven considering the circumstances.

"Then what's the good of it?" he demanded, fiercely, jumping up from his chair and approaching me, while his eyes blazed with the mad excitement that he had shown on his arrival.

I saw then that I had made a slip. I felt instinctively that Baily ought to have said it was quite possible

and just, and that it would have been better for those defaulters had they never been born than to thus trifle with the stern majesty of the law; but having made the statement, consistency demanded that I should stick to it.

"However," said I, soothingly, "suppose you sit down quietly, and tell me the whole facts of the case. You must remember that I am not aware of *all* the circumstances yet. Bailey doesn't know everything, and even if he is right, there may be a good possibility that we shall be able to fix this matter for you. Do you smoke?"

He nodded assent, and I pushed my cigar-case over to him, and breathed freely as I saw him select one and light it, and re-establish himself in his chair.

"That's the style," said I. "Now tell me the whole story right from the beginning,"—and make it last until some one comes along to get me out of your confounded clutches, I mentally added.

"My name is Johnson," he commenced, in such a quiet, matter-of-fact voice that it would have defied an expert to detect that there was anything amiss with his sanity. From my earliest infancy I have been a



speculator. Some of the most stupendous projects, the most world-enthraling schemes that have ever been known, have emanated from this brain." He tapped his forehead with his forefinger, maybe with the idea of letting me into the secret of where he kept so important and valuable an organ.

"And have left it precious hollow, as a result," I thought to myself; but I only nodded, and he continued:

"I will not dwell on my early speculations. Pecuniarily, they were not a success, for the public could not be induced to take them up. They were appalled at their magnitude, and their puny intellects were not capable of grasping the immense wealth and advantages contained in my projects. Quite recently, however, I conceived my most brilliant scheme. It struck me, as it may have done yourself, what a waste to his country and society at large the ordinary suicide is; but it had never occurred to anyone that he might be made to serve a useful and profitable purpose. It did to me, though, and after much careful thought I conceived and projected the company for the Utilisation of Suicides, Ltd., and offered the public a chance of participating by a thousand £10 shares.

"I had very little capital myself at that time, and the public, as blind as usual, refused to take a good thing when they saw it and held aloof; but the few hundreds I had got were sufficient for my purposes, and I floated the company on my own account, and became secretary and shareholders and managing director all in one. It saves a lot of trouble, this plan,

and I can recommend it in preference to a concern where every little tuppenny-three-farthing shareholder considers that his £10 gives him an indisputable right to bully and blackguard you at his pleasure, and when a shareholder gets an idea of that sort he generally acts on it. However, that's a detail.

"Finding, as I have just stated, that the public were not willing to take up my scheme, I resolved to run it alone for my own advantage. My idea was this. Every week there are a certain number of wretched creatures, who, finding the cares and worries of life too much for them contrive to drop out of it and give it the go-by.

"Well, now! supposing you have a person, driven by want, we'll say, to put an end to his miserable existence, how much better it is for that person that he should be allowed a few months of real ease and comfort before he commits the desperate act, and that the comforting conviction he is 'doing' some insurance company shall finally sustain him, and render his last moments happy! You are doubtless aware of the warm, substantial comfort the average man can find in the knowledge that he is besting a company or a society, and you may even be able to recall the pleasure you have yourself experienced in surreptitiously working a penny or twopence out of a railway company. There is a peculiar fascination in it that is inbred. Why, when the automatic delivery machines were first introduced, half the men in London were telling the other half how to obtain fifty per cent, of their contents at the expenditure of the price of one article, and the other half retorted

with a superior device by which the machine could be quite emptied and the penny recovered for future use into the bargain.

"How much kinder it is, then, I repeat, that the intending suicide should be allowed a few pleasures and privileges before he commits the rash act, and how much better it is for you when you go to draw the premium on his life, which you have arranged in return for giving him this little solace. That was the working basis of my scheme, and it was a grand one—in theory.

"I was constrained to limit my operations owing to a want of capital, so I secured a house, and furnished it to accommodate ten persons. Then I advertised for miserable people, with a bias in favour of suicide, and obtained three the very first week. They were very favourable specimens for my purpose—homeless, hungry, and ragged, and so hopeless were their prospects that a speedy grave was their one wish. In fact, they told me that they had actually looked in on me on their way down to the river just to see if they could do me a last service before quitting this vale of woe; and one of them, a sad and dreary-looking young fellow, said he trusted that I would not detain him unnecessarily, because he was longing for the silent tomb, and a prolonged hankering of that description was exceedingly detrimental to health, he had been told.

"I laid my scheme before them, and finally they accepted it, only stipulating that their time on earth might not be set too long. I, on the part of 'The Company for the Utilisation of Suicides, Ltd.,' agreed

to house, and clothe, and feed them, and to allow them pocket-money in moderation, for the space of six calendar months, and they in return were to permit me to effect an insurance on their lives, and they were to commit suicide at the termination of the six months in a manner that would allow of my drawing the premiums. That is, they were to contrive their exit so that they should figure as 'accidental deaths,' so as not to give the insurance companies a chance of disputing the claims.

"They all fell in with my wishes in a melancholy, listless fashion, and I could see it was the ulterior motive affecting the Insurance Companies that really prevailed with them to consent. The personal advantages which I offered seemed to have no weight at all; though, I must confess, they displayed a considerable though sober interest and energy over the feeding, and the clothing, and the pocket-money—especially over the pocket-money.

"One man went straight out and ordered a five-guinea suit to be charged to me. He explained that he was obliged to wear five-guinea clothes owing to his skin being so tender. Anything cheaper than that, he said, irritated him so that he could not properly fix his attention on his approaching end. This surprised me rather, because, when he came to me, he was wearing a pair of canvas trousers which had been supplied to him at the Union owing to his having destroyed his own in a fit of despondency.

"Another of the company's *protégés* considered that a silk hat and a gold watch and chain were in keeping

with the terms of his agreement, and stood out for a twenty-five shilling head-gear, because the cheaper kinds were apt to be narrow in the brim and so cause him headaches. I demurred; but he was firm and I gave way, consoling myself with the reflection that the man was insured for eight hundred pounds and that in six months this property would be 'effects' which would revert to the company. All the same, they were fearfully extravagant, and when eight members were enrolled on the books I had to close the list, for I found that I was not in a position to justify any further expenses until one or two of the premiums dropped in, when I could go ahead again and eventually advance the company to a position of influence and wealth.

"They were very fond of good living, I discovered, and meal-time at my small establishment was a sight to marvel at, so varied and particular were their fads and fancies in this direction. They seemed to take an uncommon interest in worldly things, too, for men in such sad positions, and were cheerful and even light-hearted in a sober, reflecting way, though they never forgot that they were doomed. They referred to this fact frequently, and their generally expressed desire to meet my wishes at the expiration of their time was touching in the extreme. One man took a box at the Lyceum for the season, and went nightly so that he might perchance obtain a hint from tragedy for terminating his career in a pleasant and easy fashion. He said it would be of immense advantage to me that he should learn how to die naturally and gracefully when it came to the inquest. Another

thoughtful member did the rounds of all the burlesque and comic-opera theatres within reach. He explained that he felt a growing satisfaction with life stealing upon him, and that was the only way he could think of to drive him back to the sorrow and gloom from which he had no wish to emerge. A third subscribed in advance to all the comic papers in existence, and sat in his room day after day surrounded by piles of them, skimming through their pages, ensconced in the depths of a huge leather chair, and smoking sixpenny cigars. I dropped in on him one morning when he was so engaged and he explained his object in this. He was a conscientious man with a capital head for business, and if it hadn't been for the money I had sunk in his policy I would have taken him into partnership. He had a scheme on hand for benefiting the society which had taken such care of him, that even I should never have dreamt of.

"Yes," he said, in answer to a query of mine, "I consider these papers to be excellent for the purpose of stimulating a man's natural desire for the hollow tomb: they are so screamingly funny that they impel a desire for sorrow and gloom as a sort of reaction and a protest against too much mirth. Why, I had some thoughts of asking you to reduce my time in this vale of misery and woe to four months; but you have been so kind that I will not place myself under any further obligation. Instead, I will meet some of that obligation, and die as independent as I have lived. The majority of these papers carry a free insurance policy with them, and I shall be found dead in a

railway accident with no less than twenty-seven of them in my possession. That will mean twenty-seven thousand—and the five hundred on my life—twenty-seven thousand five hundred pounds, which I have arranged to fall to your company at my death. Good scheme, eh?"

"‘Stupendous!’ I gasped.

"‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘and so simple and straightforward. Authorities kick up a fuss; twenty-seven comicalities on one person—not natural! Must have done it on purpose.’

"‘Not a bit of it, say you! Why, the man has been a subscriber for months. It was a mania with him. No go! Authorities pay, and look as pleasant as they can over the advertisement. We’ll just ruin those insurance people between us.’

"‘But about the accident?’ I queried. ‘How will you manage that?’

"‘Easily,’ said he, with a leer which ought to have set me thinking, but didn’t. ‘When my time is up, you will give me a few hundred pounds, and I shall travel and travel and travel until a suitable collision comes my way. I shall be in it and—the thing is done. Oh, you can’t stump my natural resources; they are inexhaustible, sir—simply inexhaustible.’”

"I exulted to think my scheme was developing beyond my most sanguine hopes, and longed for the time to elapse, so that I might test its action in its most vital point. I pondered meanwhile over what my friend of the papers had told me, and made up my mind that a few policy-carrying papers should form

part of the outfit of my family of suicides when, one after another, they took their last sad walk abroad.

"I saw myself rolling in wealth, for there was practically no limit to the opportunities for money-getting presented by the introduction of this new feature. I figured out a net profit of over three million pounds in less than three years one afternoon, and then my brain whirled, and I stopped. The prospect was almost appalling in its magnitude, and I saw myself a Cræsus, ruling the world and dictating to kings and nations. You can observe the simplicity of the thing for yourself. It is just a simple problem in proportion. If one suicide will produce £27,500, less about £150 for working expenses, how much will fifty, or a hundred, or a thousand suicides produce? And yet, in an age of sin and misery and dire poverty, it had not only not occurred to any one to exploit such an easy method of obtaining wealth enough to settle everybody in a position of competency and comfort; but that the public at large had not the gumption to take up a few hundred miserable ten-pound shares in it when a shrewder intellect than any of them possessed had evolved it."

"Yes, it is strange," I observed. "And how did the thing work out? Have the insurance people paid up?"

"Well, no," he replied, hesitatingly, "and that is what I have come to you about. The men won't suicide. When the time came round for them to carry out their contract, the anxiety they had displayed at the outset gave out. They kept putting

me off on one pretext or another, and at last flatly refused to fulfil their contract. One had the impudence to tell me he was pretty comfortable as he was, and he reckoned he should be an ass to do anything of the kind. He said it wasn't good enough. Another told me he had conscientious scruples against the thing, or otherwise he was quite ready and willing, and the third preaches me a sermon on the sin and wickedness of self-murder, when I suggested that he should become practically useful to the society which had so befriended him. And there they remain, eating me out of house and home, spending my money, and keeping me out of a cool two hundred and twenty thousand pounds between them.

"And now you know the facts of the case, I want you to compel these men to carry out their contract. You know enough law for that, don't you?"

For the life of me I couldn't help laughing; but I turned it into a chuckle of conscious power, for fear of arousing him from his quieter mood into a less comfortable one as far as I myself was concerned.

Something or other had turned the man's brain, and in that state he had been imposed upon by a crew of clever rogues—that was an evident explanation, and my journalistic instincts coming to the fore, I resolved to see the matter out.

"Certainly I do," I replied. "But, you see, if you appeal to law the transaction will be almost certain to reach the ears of the insurance people, and they will cry off their bargain."

"Good gracious! I never thought of that," he ejaculated. "What am I to do, then?"

"Perhaps if I went with you and reasoned a bit with these refractory—er—er—patients of yours it might have a good result," I suggested. "I could even threaten them with the law, and so induce at any rate the more timid amongst them to reconsider the matter in your favour, and——"

I heard my friend outside, and stopped short, and the next moment he was fumbling at the door.

"Here's just the man we require," I observed, quietly. "You might turn the lock for him. He can help us if any one can."

To my relief my visitor accepted this suggestion placidly. Stepping over he unfastened the door, and the next minute my friend was in the room.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Bob, old man," he commenced, and then he glanced inquiringly at the intruder.

"This gentleman has called to see me on a matter of business, Jack," I said, energetically frowning at him by way of a warning. "It is a contract matter. I wish you would just run into the next room and look up 'Tompkins on Contracts' for me, I am not quite sure on one of the points. I will give you the rough particulars."

And, finding a piece of paper, I hastily scrawled, "This man is a dangerous lunatic: fetch help," and gave the note to him.

He understood from my manner that something was amiss—I was jolly glad he didn't give me away over that "Tompkins on Contracts"—and the next

minute I heard a long-drawn whistle of astonishment from the passage.

"The book is out," he said, casually, putting his head in the doorway again. "I will just run across to Phillips and borrow his."

I do like a man with a little tact about him, and I inwardly blessed my friend's gumption as I realised what a mess I might have got into if he had gone rushing out in a panic at my note.

Ten minutes later a couple of sturdy policemen had my unfortunate client in safe custody, and he now dreams in the sheltering walls of a lunatic asylum of the wealth and power that might have been his had all men been honest and honourable.

We went round that evening to have a look at the premises of "The

Company for the Utilisation of Suicides, Ltd.," did Jack and I.

It was a three-storied, respectable-looking building at the back of Guildford-street. As

we gazed, a vision of splendour, with a dust-coat, silk hat, spats, and tan kid gloves, came out smoking

a cigar and jauntily swinging a gold-headed cane.

An inborn spirit of mischief tempted me, and I beckoned to him.



"Good evening," I remarked.

"Evening," he replied with a note of suspicion and distrust.

"Isn't it about time you committed suicide in the interest of Mr. Johnson and his company?" I queried.

A startled look flitted across his features, and was followed by a furtive grin.

"What do you—I don't understand what you are driving at," he commenced; but seeing the grin reflected in our faces, he abandoned his pretence of ignorance. "The game's up, then?" he queried.

I nodded.

"Where's lunny Johnson?"

"On his way to a lunatic asylum," I replied. "At the police-station just now, as the preliminary stage."

"S'elp me, never! You don't say so?" he ejaculated, and, turning abruptly, he dashed into the house again.

Jack and I took up an unobtrusive position in the rear of an adjacent cabstand, and waited for developments. We hadn't long to wait. Two minutes later a string of well-dressed, aristocratic-looking individuals meandered out of that building, carrying all sorts of parcels and packages, and after a stealthy glance about to see that they were unobserved, they parted company, and each made a bee-line for obscurity.

"Another good scheme gone wrong," I observed to my friend, as we returned to Jack's den; and so ended Johnson's little "spec."

The Plot that Failed:

A STORY OF LOVE, LITERATURE, AND LAW.

Man is but gilded loam.

SHAKESPEARE.

Yes, and some are not even gilded.

ANDOM.



ONCE upon a time—this is not a fairy tale; but there is safety in ambiguous phrases—there dwelt in the Midlands a wealthy, respectable, and elderly lady, who was known in her neighbourhood as “the rich Miss Hepsley.” A typical old maid she was, with a weakness for tea, a gentle inclination towards her cat, a worshipful adoration for her pet pug Peter, and a mild regard for her niece Helen, the only daughter of a scapegrace brother who had died some five years previously. In addition to this, Miss Hepsly was a victim to the scribbling craze, and used up many reams of paper, and much of her niece’s patience in the production of stories that were useful chiefly as a means of increasing, to an appreciable extent, the revenue derived from the sale of postage stamps, and for affording work to the local postman. She affected the “intense” style; and this was mainly the ultimate cause of the misguided lady’s undoing. For, be it understood, Helen loved a barrister, budding and

briefless, and was beloved by him in return, and to the same extent—"intense," after the manner of the aunt's literary style. Aunty, on the contrary, didn't love the youth. In fact, to put it in plain language she went as near to hating him as is possible for an elderly lady of staid demeanour, much wealth, and a religion that operated at least one day out of seven.

Jack—Helen called him Jack, so I think I may venture to take the same liberty—was a big, square-shouldered, good-looking young fellow of about five-and-twenty. He was a general favourite, for he always had a pleasant word for charwoman and employer alike. Genial, kind-hearted, and liberal, he found life very comfortable and jolly; but, alas for Jack! his was the good nature of the Newfoundland puppy—honest, careless, blundering, and dense. None of the trials and temptations of the world had beset him; no petty worries and vexations that, without being tangible enough to face and battle with, nevertheless serve to ruin the temper, undermine the morals, and produce the grumbling, peevish, discontented individuals whom one does now and again encounter. Life, as far as he understood it, was a huge frolic, and, consequently, being happy and good-natured himself, he encountered a fair amount of good nature in return, and, as I have before said, he was popular. Even Aunty liked him at first; and if it hadn't been for two facts this story would never have been told. These facts were, that Jack was dense and tactless, and he had no acquaintance with the "intense," at least in literature.

If it hadn't been for these failings Jack would probably have married the fair Helen in the orthodox way, with the blessing of Aunty and a liberal portion of her wealth to start him in his new position. As it was—well, as it was he came nearly to making shipwreck of his hopes as far as Aunty's favour and assistance were concerned, and had it not been for the remarkably shrewd promptness of the young lady and the weak folly of her aunt the lives of the young couple would have been materially altered. This is the story.

One evening, shortly after Jack's advent on the scene as the accepted—as far as the young lady was concerned, that is—suitor, Miss Hepsley took occasion, before giving or refusing her consent to the match, to test the aspiring youth by reading aloud her latest literary production, which was even more “intense” than the usual run of her effus—er—I mean stories. The test consisted in noting the amount of appreciation displayed by the young man, and doubtless had he only affected a staid mien with a *soupeçon* of interest and mild excitement, he would have got through the ordeal creditably enough. But, not understanding the “intense” himself. Jack thought to discover the right and proper facial expressions in the countenance of his lady-love. Helen, I grieve to say, always seemed to discover something mirth-provoking in her aunt's most pathetic and soul-moving passages, although, having tact in plenty, she knew enough to disguise her amusement from the not too keen-sighted old lady. This night she was more indiscreet than usual, though,

and helped on by Jack's look of bewilderment, and the imploring signals for guidance he constantly threw to her, she had much ado to keep from laughing outright, and smothered many unmistakable titters in her handkerchief.

In his blundering, easy-going manner, and without troubling himself further about the matter, Jack immediately jumped to the conclusion that the piece was humorous, if not comic, and proceeded to demonstrate his appreciation thereof in his usual hearty, boisterous way. He sniggered, roared, stamped his feet in his (feigned) ecstasy of mirth, and wound up by congratulating the scandalised old lady, and vowing that it was the best thing he had heard since "We three and Troddles."

"And was it really funny?" I fancy I hear you inquire. Not a bit of it. It was "intense"; but intense as it was, it was not nearly so much so as the look of blank dismay on Jack's face when, amidst the solemn silence following his unfortunate outburst—a silence which not even Helen dared to break—he gathered from the expression of scorn and disgust on the lady's face that he had once more "put his foot in it."

"Clean in, chappy," he confided to a friend, later, when dismally recounting the episode, which, if it hadn't affected him so closely, he would have considered an excellent joke. "Up over the ankle, and when the old lady looked me up and down through those gold-rimmed goggles of hers, I jolly well wished I could have got the rest of myself in, too, and crawled away by some

subterranean passage from the house to a quiet out-of-the-way corner where I could kick myself at leisure. I *am* a clumsy ass!"

"So you are, Jack," was the candid and unsympathetic reply, out of which, however, Jack extracted no great amount of satisfaction.

Miss Hepsley said but little; but that little sufficed and Jack came no more to the house. Thenceforth he was compelled to do his courting at the residence of mutual acquaintances, on the journeys to and from church when the absence of Miss Hepsley permitted, and at casual (and quite unexpected, of course) meetings in shady lanes and retired field-paths. Meanwhile, Helen, with an absolute devotion to her lover, kept quiet and continued to act as the medium by which her aunt's "intense" fictional efforts were conveyed in excellent penmanship to unappreciative publishers. She was not a worldly-minded young lady; but for all that she possessed the rare good sense to discriminate that Jack and she, as a combination, would stand a chance of a more comfortable and happy existence by entering into it with the full sanction of her aunt than by, metaphorically speaking, kicking over the traces, and e'en doing as she listed in open defiance of her relative's wishes and commands.

Some little time after the contretemps above related it happened that Miss Hepsley was brought in contact with a real live author who had not only written something, as she herself had done, but had succeeded in deluding a publisher into bringing it out in a tasty little volume that roused feelings singularly like envy,

hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness in her breast. It was true the work in question contained not a tithe of the ability and power of her own productions (in Miss Hepsley's eyes), and she had read a criticism of it in which it was plainly and brutally stated that the paper, printing, and binding were the best and only features in the book worth mentioning; but for all that it was published, and Miss Hepsley would have been willing to have had any injustice—adverse criticisms are always unjust in an author's eyes—done her work if only it could be placed before the public in dainty cloth-bound covers with her own name inscribed thereon, to proclaim her genius to the world at large, and more particularly to the small portion of it that resided in and around Trinketsbury, her native village.

From the moment of encountering an inhabitant of the world of letters, Miss Hepsley's scribbling craze became an all-devouring fever which rent her day and night, and left her an easy prey for temptation when it came along. By superhuman efforts she at last succeeded in getting this great man of the pen—it wasn't me, I wish it to be understood; this story is not personal—to promise to put in an appearance at one of her "at homes," resolving when once getting him in her toils to use him as far as possible for her own ends that she, like he, might go and do likewise in the matter of publishing a volume.

"And who knows?" thought the worthy lady. "He might take a fancy to Helen, and then nothing would be more natural than for him to personally

interest himself in my book, which he must see is better than his own, and go and make those nasty, horrid publishers buy it."

There was a certain amount of shrewdness in this idea, and doubtless it occurred to the worthy lady that this author's chance of a successful wooing would greatly depend on his doing as she hoped. "The best laid schemes, etc." You know, or ought to, if you don't, this clever tag-end of truth, that has been worn to rags by too frequent quotation, and it suffices to say that Miss Hepsley's well-constructed scheme "gang'd agley" in its turn, and for this Helen herself was responsible. She was in love with Jack, and, moreover, considered (and did not scruple to mention her views) that this new aspirant for her hand and her aunt's fortune—some of it, that is—was a presumptuous and ill-mannered little segment of conceit, "and fastened up fearfully ugly, aunty."

Aunty frowned and scolded; but then Aunty was quite welcome to do both as much as she pleased, while niece in her turn persisted in her statement, and strenuously refused to have anything more to do with the man of letters than bare civility required.

Mr. Dickens Smith was unmistakably smitten, and became a constant visitor at Miss Hepsley's house. *He* was not dense, and neither was he tactless, so that when he failed to understand the "intense," as interpreted by Miss Hepsley—a fault which may be reasonably forgiven him—he knew too much to let this want of perception become apparent. He listened gravely, with an observation or casual suggestion

now and again, to stories and "little things" which were produced and read over by the yard for his delectation. He even ventured to criticise, in the gently and "while recognising her wonderful talent, yet in his humble opinion so-and-so and so-and-so would tend to increase the force of such-and-such a passage" style. Didn't she think so? Of course she did. The necessary alteration was made, the shrewd young man scored one more, and the old lady was the greater pleased with him, and duly admired his cleverness and intelligence. And last crowning impu—I mean diplomacy, of all, he even went so far as *to ask* to be favoured with further readings. He said he considered that they were an education to him, and that he had had no previous idea of what the "intense" school was really like. This last statement was probably true, for he could have had (had he been speaking ironically) no idea of what the "intense," according to Miss Hepsley, was like, insomuch that she was the creator and expounder of it; and, on the other hand, the fact of mistaking her stories for a fair specimen of it clearly proclaimed his want of acquaintance. The "intense" school in fiction is bad enough; but it is nothing like Miss Hepsley's effusions, which erred mainly in overdoing the thing, and becoming speciously word-clothed drivel.

But, for all this, Mr. Smith "knew his book," and had the niece only proved as complying as the aunt, he would have found himself on the high road to a life of comfortable competency and ease. He was not in love with Helen—he was an author, and he had

got a first book to lavish all his spare affections on—but he admired her. She was pretty, and talented, and vivacious, while at the same time she came of good family, and was wealthy in prospective. It is true that she professed to lack interest in his literary production, and even spoke slightly of that clever work; but this was, of course, due either to mental obscurity or else wilful perversity—the former being the more likely explanation, seeing that she included himself in the catalogue of things animate and inanimate which she failed to admire and look up to.

It happened one evening, when Helen was out of the way—not out of Jack's way by-the-bye—that Miss Hepsley and Mr. Smith sat together in the drawingroom at Hepsley House. They were talking, as they always were, on matters literary,



and the conversation had veered round to the singular lack of appreciation and insight possessed by publishers, and the crudity of taste in fiction possessed by the British public.

“No, my dear madam,” said Mr. Smith, in his dignified and dictatorial way; “it isn’t altogether the fault of the publishers. You see, the reading public

run after a name. It doesn't much matter whether the name belongs to one proved to be able to produce clever and elevating books. Any name will do, so that they are sufficiently acquainted with it. For instance, a man who has explored Africa, or one who has made a name on the judicial bench, or one who has squandered a huge fortune in a public and popular way, may write a book which will run through five or six editions, although the author may not have the slightest literary ability. It is not that they may be presumed to have a better acquaintance with these subjects either. Indeed, the man who has explored Africa must confine himself to novels, or horse-racing or criminal-court incidents. If he ventures on the subject of the Dark Continent he will fall flat, for the public have generally heard what he has to say on that subject through the newspapers, and will have none of it. It is the same with the others. Fiction is an ever-ready field to operate in for all sorts and conditions of eminent personages; but they must keep away from their special subjects, and dabble in those they know not of—the cleric in criminal-court incidents; the judge in horse-racing matters; the discoverer in clerical topics, and all will be well with them. It is the name that operates, madam; and neither the man, his ability, nor his work will satisfy the publisher and his clients like a well-known and popular name. To succeed in literature, your name must be known to the world at large in connection with something, be it only a notorious robbery or a complicated and unbecoming scandal."

Thus quoth Mr. Smith, and half-an-hour later, when

that gentleman had taken his departure, thus Miss Hepsley *loquitur*: "I wonder if I could cause my name to be known. A robbery (dreamily and in intense speculation) would be rather an undertaking, and there would be all the police-court exposure, and perhaps prison. And yet it *would* be nice to get *A Surging Soul* published. But the police-court! No; I don't think I could face that. Ah! the scandal. Yes, I think I could have a scandal."

It took Mrs. Hepsley till nearly eleven o'clock that night to think how she could have a scandal, and then—

"Helen! Helen! Helen!" she screamed, going to the foot of the stairs, and gazing upwards in hope and expectancy. "Are you in bed?"

"Not yet, Aunty," came the response. "Shall I come down?"

"No, dear," answered Miss Hepsley, in gentle tones. "Stay where you are, and I will come up. I want to speak to you." And then to herself she added, "I do hope the dear girl will consent."

Upstairs the fair Helen blushed, and murmured, anxiously, "Gracious! I wonder if Aunty has heard that I have been with Jack."

Her fears on this score were soon set at rest. Her aunt was too complacent, and her voice too gentle for her to have heard anything half so likely to disturb her equanimity and to raise her wrath. Helen sought another reason for this unusual visit, for they were together in the girls' boudoir—I believe that is the correct term for these mysterious feminine retreats—Helen, standing by the fireplace, and her aunt seated in an easy-chair con-

fronting her. The latter seemed anxious to speak, and yet diffident about doing so, and in the silence Helen cast round for some other likely explanation of her aunt's visit. She rather feared it might be an appeal in favour of that odious Mr. Smith's addresses, and she clenched her lips firmly in scorn of the "wretched little creature" who was the cause of these frequent exhortations on his behalf, and whom that misguided lady persisted, in daring to contrast with her—Helen's—Jack. Further speculation was saved her, for with a sigh and a half shudder, like one who is about to plunge into cold water, prompted rather by a sense of duty than by inclination, Miss Hepsley overcame her reluctance and waded desperately into the subject that was occupying her mind.

"I want to have a scandal, Helen," the old lady commenced.

"A what, Aunt?" queried the girl, half-fearing that a too-devout pursuit of the "intense" had softened her estimable relative's brain—a not unlikely contingency, she who understood the subject considered.

"A scandal, my dear," pursued the elder lady. "Mr. Smith has been telling me that if I can get mixed up in a scandal my books will sell by thousands."

The dear old lady was rather improving on the text of Mr. Smith's statement; but by that time she had quite come to believe that that was the sum and substance of what he had told her.

"Don't interrupt me, my dear," she went on, seeing Helen about to make some observation. "I have quite determined to have a scandal, and I want you to

help me. I have thought it all out, and have got a capital plan. I will draw some money out of the bank to-morrow, in notes for large amounts, and will leave them on my table. The servants can be kept out of the way so as to make it appear impossible for them to have touched them, and I want you to put them in my cabinet. It will be better if you do this, because I shouldn't like to tell a deliberate untruth when I say I never touched them after I laid them on my table. You must be seen to go into my room, and I will accuse you of taking them. I am afraid you will have to go to the police-station, or else it won't be printed in the papers; but you won't mind, dear, will you, when you think of my getting *A Surging Soul* published? And then, of course, I will happen to go to the cabinet and find the notes, and will drive down to the station and explain that it is all a mistake, and that the money must have been accidentally mislaid."

She paused a second, and then, smitten rather by the look in her niece's face, and perhaps dimly discerning that it was rather a cool and even brutal proposal to set before a young girl, and that girl the daughter of her dead brother, she—making matters only worse in her flurry—resumed: "And if you—should you—I mean I will give you the notes after, or buy you that diamond brooch you were so admiring, with them. You will like that, won't you, dear? Why don't you speak, Helen? Isn't it a lovely idea?"

"Beau-tiful, Aunt," replied the girl, drily, in a cold, hard, voice; "and people will say that I really did take

them, and that you made up the story about mislaying them after your anger had cooled, on purpose to avoid the disgrace. And I shall be looked on with scorn, and perhaps Jack will believe it too, and—and ——” Here, like the little idiot she must have been, Helen sank into a chair, and finished her sentence in a burst of weeping.

Bewildered though, not being of a particularly fine moral nature, and certainly not sensitive herself, hardly seeing reason sufficient for this demonstration at such a perfectly lovely and clever idea, the old lady shamefacedly managed to calm the outraged feelings of her niece, and, sighing dismally, dismissed all ideas of this easy cut to literary fame.

Somehow or other on the following day Helen encountered Jack, and the remembrance of last night's proposal still rankling in her mind, it came to pass that Jack, before they parted, was given a full and succinct history of the affair. Now, as I have more than once already explained, Jack was dense; but also he was a lawyer, practically penniless, and in love. In consequence of all this these two wicked young heads came close together in both senses of the term, and a united scheme was concocted, which, to tell you at once, would spoil the *dénouement* of my story—a thing no true concoctor of stories would ever dream of doing.

That night Helen sought her 'aunt, and to that lady's great astonishment reopened the subject of the previous evening.

“I think, Aunt, we can manage to have the scandal you want after all, if you will let me arrange the matter.”

Miss Hepsley answered not; but waited with an expression of blank surprise for her niece's communication.

"It is a perfectly lovely idea, Aunt," she went on in an excited outburst. "And it is so much better for your purpose than what you proposed, and it will let me come off very much better, too."



(Just how much better Miss Hepsley didn't realise until later.) It is this. You get the notes as you suggested and mislay them yourself. Then you can spread it abroad that I sto—took them—tell it in confidence to Mr. Smith, which will be as good as publishing it in our paper—and then I will leave your house in a rage, and go down to Uncle Hepsley, and bring an action for slander against you. After the case has created a sensation you had better compromise and prevent the actual trial taking place, because Jack says it will be dangerous for us should it do so. He says those horrid lawyers would perhaps find out that it was a conspiracy, and we should get laughed at, and perhaps prosecuted for perjury. That's Ja—my idea, and won't it be just fun, Aunt?"

"Oh, what a clever girl you are, Helen!" said the

astonished and delighted old lady, as her slower apprehension allowed her to grasp the full possibilities of this really brilliant scheme. "But you are sure that you won't mind, dear?"

"Quite, Auntie," Helen replied; and thus it was arranged and subsequently carried out.

A fortnight later it somehow became bruited abroad that Miss Hepsley had had a large sum of money, all in banknotes, too, stolen by her niece—"a nasty ungrateful girl, whom she had rescued from the workhouse and brought up as carefully and kindly as if she had been a child of her own." It was shocking, scandalous, said the village gossips, and much the same, only in more pretty terms, said the local doctor, clergyman, and those moving in the better society when they went to condole with the victim to misplaced generosity.

Strange to say, Miss Hepsley didn't seem so much angry as hurt that the report should have got abroad; but she made no attempt to deny the statement, and treated all inquiries with a sigh and shake of the head, as if to imply that any discussion of so painful an affair would be too much for her shattered nerves.

A day or two later Helen left Hepsley House, and thus confirmed belief in her guilt, and loosened the tongues of those who had, for various reasons, refrained from joining in the spiteful and malicious innuendoes that were in circulation. The local inhabitants, great and small, high and low, rich and poor, all joined in the general clamour, while Jack laughed quietly in his sleeve, and Miss Hepsley, with a half-frightened

and half-triumphant feeling, saw the good time for her literary venture well on its way.

Then a new phase was introduced. It became known throughout the land that the rich Miss Hepsley was being summoned to meet a charge of having wilfully and maliciously slandered her niece, and that the damages claimed varied from five to fifty thousand pounds, according to the imagination of the editors of the different papers. For many weeks the subject was kept before the public. Speculation ran high, and the maiden lady away off at Trinketsbury obtained enough publicity to satisfy a round dozen of notoriety hunters, and to float a hundred "Surging Souls," if such means would suffice. The solicitors for the plaintiff evidently understood their business thoroughly, and when Mr. Smith received a *subpœna* to attend the trial as the principal witness to the slander Miss Hepsley became seriously alarmed, and wished devoutly that her niece would bring the farce to an end as arranged, while her solicitors rubbed their hands, and gleefully murmured that it would be a splendid case. Rather difficult? Yes, certainly rather difficult; but for all that a splendid case. Did they think their client would come off successfully? Well, they could hardly venture to speak as to that. Messrs. Jinks and Jones were sharp practitioners—very sharp indeed—but they would make a good fight for it, and if they were unfortunate enough to fail, why, there was still the glory of the struggle accruing to them. A glory for which Miss Hepsley would undoubtedly have to pay heavily, they might have added, only of that they

preferred to say nothing; and, of course, they couldn't reasonably be expected to content themselves, even though they were solicitors, with glory alone, which at the best is unsatisfactory and a poor substitute for hard cash.

As a matter of fact, they were shorn of the glory entirely, for before their case was set down to be heard an order to compromise was received, and the case was settled, to their great sorrow, by the payment of the eight thousand pounds demanded as damages for the lacerated feelings of Messrs. Jinks and Jones's fair client. They were further directed to cause to be inserted in the morning papers a concise statement setting forth how that one, Letitia Hepsley, of Hepsley House, Trinketsbury, thereby exonerated her niece, Helen Hepsley, of all and any complicity in the removal of any moneys or articles whatsoever from the above-mentioned address. How, further, that she wished to make it clearly understood that the said removal of the said moneys was due entirely and solely to her own personal action, and she regretted and apologised for the pain and distress which a belief in her complicity in the removal of the moneys had occasioned the said niece.

Then, having obtained her object, at some considerable expense—of course the eight thousand pounds was only a temporary outlay, so to speak—Miss Hepsley once more despatched *A Surging Soul* to the publishers, and waited placidly for the sensation that the new book by the defendant in the recent

slander case would create. It came back—the book I mean, not the sensation—and, disheartened by this last failure, after all the pains she had taken to ensure success, she locked it away with other cherished objects in the secret recesses of her cabinet, and viewed it no more.

From literature to matrimony is not a very long step, and shortly afterwards she wrote to her niece this wise: “My dear Helen,—You will perhaps be surprised to hear that I have married Mr. Smith. By-the-bye, I shall be glad if you will recover the eight thousand pounds deposited with your solicitors. Bring the money down, and be assured of a loving welcome from—Your affectionate aunt, LETITIA HEPSLEY-SMITH.”

On the following morning the postman deposited a letter at Hepsley House, at a time when the mistress and her recently-acquired spouse were breakfasting together in all happiness and amiability, as becomes newly-married couples either young or old.

“It is from Helen,” said the lady, and she broke the seal, and read—and fainted.

Mr. Hepsley-Smith, with a curious oversight, first picked up the letter and read it, and then the lady. This was what he read:

“My dear Aunt,—You will be equally surprised, I expect, to hear that I also am married. I have married Jack. Although the dear boy doesn’t understand the ‘intense’ and has not written a book, yet he is making a very creditable husband and quite a keen and clever lawyer. I have duly received the compens-

ation for your cruel slander, and am surprised that my solicitors have not yet acknowledged the same. With such a comfortable sum of money in hand to aid my purpose. I feel that I can afford to be generous and to forgive and forget the past. Therefore, if Jack is equally sure of a kind reception, we shall be pleased to come and visit you. Believe me, dear Auntie, ever your loving niece, HELEN."

A reconciliation was duly effected between the families—though Auntie never really forgave Jack for his ignorance of the 'intense,' and Mr. Hepsley-Smith bore an undying grudge against the young couple for the trick that had deprived him of eight thousand pounds of the sum for which he considered he had sold himself—and, as far as I know, they lived happy ever afterwards.

* * *

MORAL. For young ladies there is none that I can recommend. For elderly spinsters, especially those who cultivate the "intense" or any other school of literature, it is too obvious to require drawing. For young men, roughly, I should say, cultivate tact and the "intense" unless, like Jack, you are quite sure that your intended is a Helen.

In a Moment of Madness;

OR, THE FRIENDSHIP OF DIOGENES.



IT was such a simple thing, so sordid, so unromantic, so ghastly in its commonplace, everyday occurrence that no one scarcely even noticed it, and the evening papers hardly condescended to grant it more than a brief paragraph. A few months of dreary, hopeless struggle, a returned manuscript, a disappearance, and a hat found floating off Lambeth pier!

What are these things to London's busy throng that any attention should be paid them when they have not even the merit of originality?

The hat was recovered; its owner was traced, and his circumstances inquired into, and there the matter ended, except for an extra sharp look-out down the river kept by those whose unpleasant duty it is to recover the remains of these defaulters in life's battle from the waters that afford an ever-ready refuge.

Perhaps I am over-quick in limiting the concern for Arthur Chesney's untimely fate to the river men, for now that I come to think of it, there was another whose interest in the matter was of a more human description.

I am referring to a young lady, who held a position as clerk in a big publishing concern in the West-end.

She had been engaged to Chesney, and womanlike, had looked forward to a brightly-glowing time somewhere in the future when he should have become rich, and great, and famous through the instrumentality of his pen, and have taken her in the kindness of his nature to share in his brilliant fortunes. They had talked it over so often when walking together about the streets and squares of London, and—this was the end of it all.

Hers was not a complaining, fretful, obtrusive grief; it was too deep for that. A momentary tightening about the lips when the news was first broken to her—kindly enough; but as harsh and roughly as any man, with the best of intentions must acquit himself of so painful a duty—by a mutual acquaintance, and an ever-increasing listlessness and apathy were the only signs indicating the strength of the blow that had fallen upon her.

During his sojourn in London Arthur Chesney had found lodgment in Red Lion-square, W.C. This is reached by a seemingly unimportant thoroughfare running off at right-angles to Holborn, and known as Red Lion-street. A little way up the left-hand side an alley-way takes the wayfarer a step nearer to the principal seat of this history. It is a narrow, dingy passage, filled with second-hand book and furniture shops, and redolent of fried fish in all its sickly unsavouriness, and at the end lies Red Lion-square, a very dingy and dilapidated oasis in a desert of houses and tenements, shops and hovels, and of much that is outcast in human nature.

There is very little for the poet to dwell on professionally in Red Lion-square, W.C., unless he can gather inspiration from the dingy, dilapidated-looking houses, and the strains of many street-organs, each with its attendant train of miserable, unkempt, neglected children dancing around it, or the frowsy specimens of debased womanhood standing gossiping in twos and threes, with their arms negligently rolled up in their aprons, and careless alike of their appearance and their duties. No! I am afraid there is little to appeal to poesy in that locality, though I have reason to believe that a good many of her devotees in the lowlier times of their career have been forced to spend many weary days, months, and even years in its uncongenial surroundings.

In this particular square, then, in one of the gloomiest and most dilapidated of the houses, well up under the roof, Arthur Chesney had dwelt, and there still dwelt the Diogenes of this history. Diogenes of old lived in a tub, and, making allowance for the necessary want of space, I am not sure, in the matter of dwelling, that Diogenes wasn't the better situated of the two.

To his slatternly landlady, as to every one else—and they were few enough who knew him—this Diogenes of mine was known as “Mr. Turley.” He was an old and snuffy little man, with iron grey hair, and a perpetual sober brown tweed raiment that was almost as familiar in the locality as the iron-railed enclosure that formed the redeeming spot in that dreary waste of bricks and mortar. Many years ago, he had arrived

there at the close of a summer's evening, and there he had remained. He seemed to have no occupation, but came and went at all hours of the day, though he never appeared to lack funds, and was always prompt in meeting his pecuniary claims—which was a circumstance in itself, in that neighbourhood, to be noteworthy, and to call for special attention. Time, however, which familiarises all things, had accustomed his neighbours to his presence, and had dulled the keen curiosity regarding himself and his affairs that had been provoked by the sojourn of so mysterious a personage in their midst.

It was Arthur Chesney who had flippantly designated the old man Diogenes. Chesney, at the time of his disappearance, was a young fellow of some five-and-twenty years, who had come to London to make his fortune, and had been induced as a means thereto to economise in his expenditure by taking one of the rooms available under the same roof as that which sheltered Mr. Turley.

Some fortunes are long a-making in our great metropolis, where money is so plentiful and yet so difficult of acquisition, and this fact Chesney very soon discovered. What had been an act of economy at the outset speedily became an act of necessity, and he even came to count as successful those days when he wrought sufficient to enable him to pay for his few simple and modest requirements.

Youth is ever hopeful. Full of his golden dreams for the future, and buoyed up by the innocent trustfulness of his five-and-twenty years of almost total inexperience

in the bitterness of life, he had struggled along—sometimes cheerily, sometimes despairingly—at his trade of authorship. But even youth can be brought by frequent stern, hard lessons to doubt the world's justice to those who wrestle in it for its prizes.

He was not without parts either, and the sturdy energy of his nature was sufficiently evinced in the fact that he had struggled through four terribly long, weary years in wresting a subsistence—bare enough at times it was—from the world by his pen.

A weak enough reed to lean upon in any case is the trade of authorship; and when success means board and lodging, and failure signifies starvation, even a short experience of it may prove heart-breaking. Chesney found it to be so, and the rejection of a work over which he had laboured assiduously with the care of a mother for her first-born, completed the despair that had been growing upon him by the many rebuffs and disappointments that are necessarily the lot of the man who essays to climb to fortune by the overcrowded pathways of literature.

As a matter of absolute fact, Arthur Chesney was not in the river at all. He had gone down to the side of it one evening, in a state of morbid excitement, and from watching the sluggish stream roll its slow course out to the sea, had been impelled to cast himself and his troubles into its alluring depths.

There is a strange fascination about a huge river in the night-time that will affect many minds, and to those who are at war with their fate this fascination may well prove deadly. In the daylight, with the

sun dancing over its waters, and the passage of craft over its ample bosom, the Thames is peaceful and harmless enough, gladdening the jaded toiler with its sense of restfulness and pleasure as he stands by its side in the hot sunlight and takes in the ever-changing view unrolled before his gaze. But in the night season, when the roar and rattle of the great city is hushed and still, and the black waters roll up and down under the frowning bridges and along their stony ramparts, carrying with them many a tale of tragedy and sin and sorrow, then it is that the river appears as a thing repulsive and ghastly in its suggestion of evil, and then it is that it is better to avoid it even as one would avoid the deadly mists of a tropical swamp.

Chesney plunged in, and the shock of the cold water restored him immediately to the senses that had forsaken him at the time when he had most need of them. He was a powerful swimmer, and was on land again almost as soon as the full knowledge of the cowardly nature of his deed came upon him. There the matter would have begun and ended had not a lynx-eyed member of the force chanced to observe the young fellow loitering on the Embankment, and, fearing by grim experience what would follow, watched his actions stealthily. In consequence of this, by the time Chesney reached the shore the policeman was ready to receive him, and after a few blunt questions, hauled him off to the nearest station to answer on the morrow for his attempt at self-destruction. This hardly met Chesney's views, for, while rankling with the sense of having made an utter fool of himself, the very idea of the story being

proclaimed aloud to a gaping court was more than he could contemplate calmly. So, watching his opportunity, he shook himself free from the restraining hand of the policeman, and darted across the road in pursuit of freedom, and found perfect safety from that danger under the wheels of a passing van. This last calamity landed him in the hospital with a broken arm and concussion of the brain, and quite incapable, had he been so minded, of refuting the paragraph announcing his tragic end.

Thus, for the space of six weeks, Arthur Chesney died to the world outside the big gates of the hospital in which he lay. Some of the papers devoted brief space to a few witty observations on his case, and there all memory of him ended, save in the heart of Gertrude Morley and one or two chums of his own profession who had sincerely liked the young fellow, partly for his good-nature and charm of manner, and partly out of sympathy with the cause that had shipwrecked his life as it might do theirs.

Another there was, the Diogenes of the Square, who, without being suspected of it in the least, was deeply grieved at the untimely fate of the young fellow in whom he had come to take a sincere interest. Unconsciously enough, Chesney had hit upon a very appropriate name when he termed his fellow-lodger Diogenes, for Mr. Turley had one cherished hobby—not to find an honest man, but a deserving one. He was a crank on this one subject, and for its proper carrying out he lived as his namesake of old had done, in a habitation befitting neither his years nor his station. He was the head of

one of the largest publishing firms in the West End—the one, in fact, in which Miss Morley was engaged—and one of the cleverest men of his day in his own special line. He was reputed to be especially good at judging the tastes of the reading public, and it was openly known that he was the best friend to young and untried authors in the trade. It was this keen business capacity that had enabled him to build up a huge and successful business out of a second-hand bookselling concern bequeathed him with a blessing by his father many years before.

To her employer went Miss Morley on the day but one following the reception of the news which seemed to bid fair to blight her whole life. She had with her the unfortunate story which had been the cause of Chesney's supposed act. This she had recovered easily enough, with a few other of the poor fellow's effects, from the landlady, who was glad enough to have her bill, far over-due, met in exchange for a "few rubbishy books and papers." Gertrude had firm faith in her lover's genius, and resolved as a slight personal gratification to obtain the publication, if possible, of the work he had abandoned.



"One of your own productions, my dear?" asked

Mr. Turley, with a kindly smile as, white and trembling, she laid the parcel before him, and asked his advice and assistance in the matter.

"It belonged to a—to a friend of mine, sir, who has lately died," replied the girl, struggling hard to keep back the rising tears as she remembered all that that death meant to her. "And if you can undertake its publication, or tell me whether it is of any merit, I shall be much obliged."

"Tut, tut! my dear!" was the reply. "No need to be obliged. If it is of any good, it is I who will be obliged, not you."

So saying, with a few kind words of compassion at her bereavement, Mr. Turley dismissed the girl, and took the parcel back with him to Red Lion-square, to read at his leisure.

Late into that night he sat with it, while the brawling voices from the surrounding streets and alleys came in over the housetops in a confused and discordant hum. But no sound disturbed him as he sat enthralled in the story he was reading. It was amateurish, and in places it was even crude; but there was such a depth of conception, and such a handling of characters and events, that he recognised even as he read that it was the work of genius. It was a story pure and simple; but it was one, he knew, that would, in his hands, sell by thousands. He finished it through, and there, on the last page, in careless, easy scrawl, he read, "Arthur Chesney, Red Lion-square, W.C."

A film was across the old man's eyes as he replaced

the manuscript on the table. He saw the whole ghastly tragedy in a glance then. The papers had said something about a temporary insanity resulting from a severe disappointment, and this was the very work that had caused it.

"Poor fellow, poor fellow!" he murmured. "To think that a brain that could produce this could not stand the test of a repulse! And that girl, too! Well, well! Anyway, her lover's name shall still be given the fame of the work he has accomplished, and she shall reap the recompense of what is more hers than any one else's, or my name is not John Turley! Whoever rejected that book rejected hundreds of pounds, to say nothing of committing murder in a minor degree. Poor fellow! silly fellow! If he had only have come to me; or if I had known!"

The following day he sent for Miss Morley, and told her his conviction respecting the book, and the course he was prepared to take regarding its production. His offer was generous in the extreme, and the girl subsequently understood this much better than she did at the time of his making it, so overjoyed was she at his praise of her lover's work, and the knowledge that it would obtain recognition.

"Singularly enough, my dear, I knew Mr. Chesney well," Mr. Turley remarked when he had drawn the girl out respecting her engagement, and the life of her lover. "In fact I lived in Red Lion-square with him—it was a fancy of mine."

"Then you must be Diog——" She stopped abruptly, conscious that it was hardly respectful or judicious

to tell him to his face the nickname they had bestowed upon him in personal conversations.

"Diogenes," Mr. Turley concluded for her, with a smile that vanished almost as soon as it was formed. "Yes! I am Diogenes, though hardly more fortunate than my prototype, seeing that, while he failed to find his honest man, I have lost my deserving one almost before I have discovered him. It is just an instance of the grim irony of fate, my dear young lady, which, delighting to make us the sport of its cruel caprices, allows a man to starve quietly in one street, while in the next another rushes vainly up and down seeking to find and succour him. I had a great interest in Mr. Chesney as a man, even when I knew him only as a casual acquaintance residing with me, and I would have given a great deal that this most sad affair should not have happened. Since reading this work I know that, in its way, the world is as great a loser as myself—or even you are."

For many days and weeks Arthur Chesney tossed about on the hospital bed, while the doctors shook their heads over him, and agreed together that it was only a question of time ere his strong constitution succumbed before the terrible weakness and fever resulting from his injuries.

But he didn't die, for all that; and the time slowly but surely arrived when he first returned to a consciousness of things around him, and then, through various stages, to a condition that enabled him to be transported to a convalescent home on the South Coast in connection with the institution.

He was as weak as a child, and barely rational in his understanding and conversation; but for all that he was safely on the road to health again, and a few weeks' listless enjoyment, careful nursing, and sea-breezes, did more than all the doctors could do to eradicate the lingering results of the illness he had passed through.

He didn't write to Gertrude, for of course he had no idea of the tragedy he was supposed to have figured in, and he saw no reason for distressing her with the knowledge of his accident. She would imagine that he was away upon some business or other, he reflected, and at the worst would only feel that he might have told her of his intention to be absent.

Down on the beach one sultry afternoon, propped up under the friendly shade of an old boat, which had long since completed her term of service and was now drawn up out of reach of the tide to rot away the planks and beams remaining in her, Arthur Chesney awoke from a day-dream with a start at the sound of his name.

It was a young couple, evidently a recently married one, too, on the other side of his refuge, whose words roused him into a state of excitement that he could scarcely master. They were talking about a book—his book—and its author—himself!

"Arthur Chesney—quite a young fellow, I believe, my dear."

"And died before his book came out! Doesn't it seem terrible, George, to think that he couldn't have known the splendid success of his story?"

Surely in no state of dreaming could he have heard these words so distinctly. He propped himself up on the sand, and, rising slowly, walked round to the other side of the boat. The owners of the voices assorted themselves hurriedly at the sound of his footsteps ; but they need not have displayed the embarrassment they did on his account. He saw nothing but the three volumes, with Mudie's familiar yellow label on their covers, lying by the young man's side.

"Pardon me," said Chesney, raising his hat ; "but I overheard your remark just now, and I should be much obliged if you would allow me to look at that novel."

He didn't wait for permission ; but sprung upon the



book, and tore it open in frantic eagerness. Yes, it was his own undoubtedly ! And then the reaction set in and, strength and nerve giving way together, he

dropped down on the sand, and sobbed as a child might do. This exhibition of weakness and overjoy was short-lived, however, and having regained somewhat his composure, he hastened to frame a halting apology for the strangeness of his action.

"I have been very ill," he said, simply, with a faint smile, "though I certainly am not dead ; and the sight of that book was a trifle overpowering just then. I am Arthur Chesney, its author," he concluded, and he turned and walked back to the town, leaving behind him in the very midst of their happiness, a dim discernment that life was not all made up of love, and that its terrible earnestness could reach even to the little seaside resort which they had thought to be out of the way of everything beyond the enjoyment of the hour.

The following day Chesney was in London. He went straight from the railway-station to the publishers of his book, and there, almost the first person he encountered, was the Diogenes with whom he had lodged. Now that he came to think of it Turley was not a common name ; but he would never have dreamed of connecting the little, pousy, brown-tweed-attired individual of Red Lion-square with the head of one of the biggest firms in London.

What passed in the publisher's room had better remain veiled ; for some things are too sacred to bear the most delicate handling. Needless to say, Gertrude Morley was one of the party ; and as joy never kills, the shock of the encounter was quickly overcome in the rapture of reunion.

Chesney denied the suicide, in fact his presence was incontrovertible evidence of its falsity, and just then he didn't feel it at all incumbent on himself to say anything about the attempt. He had had an accident, the papers had muddled the matter, and that was all there was in it.

A few weeks later, Arthur Chesney returned to the place of his convalescence, and with him went the companion who was to be his companion for all time. And there, behind the old boat, where he had gained the first knowledge of his success, he made full confession of that terrible moment of madness on the Embankment, and buried the matter for ever.

Arthur Chesney is now a successful author and a wealthy man. His books are read by thousands, and his pen is an influence that can move many. Mr. Turley no longer lives in Red Lion-square; but the friendship of Diogenes is the one most valued by Arthur and Mrs. Chesney, of Coggeshall, Essex of whom he is a near neighbour.

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